

The Ship in the Sky

a novel by Tracey Ellen Evans

EVNTRA001

Word Count: 48,540

A major dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

2019

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Some say a journey starts when you leave your front door.

Some say it starts far away from home, when you can neither smell its scent nor see it in your dreams no more.

Chapter 1

The sky's grumbling. Layers of gray grinding above me the way teeth grind, angry and wanting, all nap long. Two boom-clap bangs and my eyes snap open to clouds thick as clay, metal-sheet lightening and thunder thumping close and heavy as fists. I grab the stone floor and I'm watching and listening, listening and watching and I'm hearing yelling and it's my own heart yelling, and I realize this ain't dreaming.

This ain't dreaming.

I ease myself near the rock ledge, hanging there like a loose tooth when the ground rips apart, it clear splits thirty feet in front of me right through the Joneses' veggie patch. My gut leaps to my throat. Would be an awesome sight if it weren't so terrifying. Air and water and fire and earth dancing into one, blasting the ground inches from the Joneses' farmhouse splitting their flagpole, my eardrums just about splitting in the roar. I clasp on tight. Next thing, my legs are falling from my body, or my body's falling from the rock and we're sinking together, sliding down. Then silence. Earth shattering silence.

A venomous pause. Nothing moves, not even my lungs. I grab at the ledge hanging, waiting, watching.

Come on Bill. Get out of the house. Get the Missus and get the fuck out.

The elements are hovering, brewing a soup so thick and dark a rich thick and dark soup.

Triple decker boom and I'm rolling to the spine of the rock as it tilts and digs its feet in, crushing or protecting, as the sky breaks open with rain belting down. I crank my head towards the farmhouse and it's sinking.

Come on Bill and Betty.

As the sky belts the earth belts my skull belts on the back of that blasted crushing protecting rock, the ground sinking further under the weight from above and rock falling, consciousness too, and then I'm dreaming of everything.

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Whizzing in my ears. Bees. Hundreds. Whizzing high round low. I swat them away til I realize there ain't nothing but my ears doing that buzzing. And black spots in both eyes. Spots clearing to something blacker. I feel for my body, hands reaching all over for life, pulse.

How long it's been since everything turned dark? Feels like the biggest knockout I've ever had but a knock out just the same, so I breathe through the waking up bit and wait for my eyes to clear before crawling across the slanting cleft, peering over the ledge to a drop two feet higher from where the ground used to be, now a mound of sinking sludge. Low-slung clouds are hanging heavy, flooding the ground with rain like the ocean's flipped itself over.

Swinging my legs, I drop and slide a further foot before grabbing a mess of branches to heave myself up. There's some smaller rocks poking out from the mud so I stumble over them, stopping short when I see the damage beyond the tangled edge of the forest. I gawk at the farmhouse, at the gaps of land I'll have to leap over to get anywhere near that crater cradling the Joneses' stack of sticks like some big bad wolf's come and blown the whole thing down.

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The weather turned so abrupt, I bet the Joneses barely noticed the clouds crinkling and getting real moody and stirring pearly washes of paint. Betty was busy calling across two sets of doors, saying lunch was ready. Lamb with potatoes. My nostrils soaked it in. I peeled my eyes from the porthole-sized bathroom window and joined Bill waiting at the head of the table, the pot of stew brewing on the red and white patched tablecloth while the sky brewed, Betty's tubby church candle standing proud as a castle in the center, surrounded by a moat of moss with willow buds tucked in like sleeping rabbits.

Bill said something over prayers about how the earth's been parched all summer. Nothing but stiff-ironed blue. How rain's been needed in this valley like breath, but he didn't see the windows turning darker or the clouds sweeping those pearls into a deeper shade. Or how my fingers clenched around the knife and fork when a crack of thunder rippled close, making my ribs shake.

When the thunder receded and the rain began to trickle, Bill suggested I take a longer break before getting back to work. My old boss is always doing kind things like that. Poured me a double whiskey for the weather turning wet and me turning seventeen. The gold burned warm and velvet in my throat. I ain't used to spirits, so it only took minutes before my vision blurred and the dining room spun. After chugging a glass of water, the room started behaving itself, but then Bill poured me another measure with a finger to his lips when Betty headed back to the scullery and it was too impolite to stop so I downed the shot and hadn't felt that cosy since Tommy and I stole some wine from church when we were twelve.

Anyways, the whiskey is what got me walking through the drizzle to the rock. It linked farmstead to forest and is always asking for a snooze, so I tucked myself in like Betty's rabbits and waited for the storm to hit.

*

I glance back at the stubborn fist locked to the forest floor. Aside from an ugly bump sprouting on the back on my head, plus bruises the size of beetles scattering my arms and legs, I'm amazed my rock held on so steady. Turning back round to the farmstead, I tread over clumps of filth and god knows what, calling out to the Joneses, but no sounds escape my mouth. I try again, screams now breaking through, and the whole world must be listening but no one answers, not even the livestock. No one that is except the hissing hail beating my beaten-up, hungover head. Raising my arms and squinting past the farm to the fields beyond, the land's turned inside out. Brown clumps everywhere. Green skin peeled right off leaving raw tissue. Can't see a single living thing.

Then, something. A mass of heads or a monster with many, rising up and over the land and drifting closer, then tiding away. I rub my eyes. A yell punctures. Something flaps the air behind, but in front the heads keep bobbing and the bodies keep tiding. Kids. A tribe of, falling and surging in the swamp. I make to sprint after them, sliding all about while they keep flowing through a field that ain't a field, finding no purchase but each others arms and faith and swaying forth and the hail's too deafening for them to hear me anyway.

So I watch them go.

Shaken and shaking, I watch them go til they're gone.

Stumbling towards the dented tractor with my arms clasped round my chest, I huddle on the driver's seat and decide right here and now not to be afraid, though my insides are churning with the stuff. Gotta do something fast. Gotta save Bill and Betty if there's any saving left to do. I peer under the tractor and stare at the house slumped within throwing distance for a good moment or two, maybe more. Wouldn't call that fear. More like gathering my thoughts, making my breathing right again. Another tick of time and any hope of finding them dead or alive turns to something less cheerful. Looks to be only a few places I can poke through. The kitchen maybe, though it's more or less crushed beyond the doorframe. Or the hallway dumped on top of the kitchen - its orange doors an open-mouthed chick squeaking at the heavens.

The hallway then.

I raise up, ring the rainwater from my clothes, then jog towards the shingled roof which has slid down the west wall. I squat under the temporary shelter, peer through the kitchen window. All I'm seeing is dimness and dust swirling from fallen wooden limbs. Ducking and diving, I trip through the front door, banging my shoulders on a crippled hat stand. The hallway's groaning and moaning. A naked lightbulb's dangling on a noose-thin rope from a finger-length fault line in the ceiling, flickering and swaying slight. I cringe at the sight. Side-stepping a vertical bench, the floorboards creaking under my feet, I spot Bill's yellow rain gear hanging on some antique hooks: hat, jacket, galoshes. One boot's lodged under the bench end, the other's a bathing duck near the back of the hallway floating in a puddle where the wall's caving in on itself.

Everything's two sizes too big but I ain't complaining. I grab the boots and pull them over my sodden socks, then scramble the galoshes and jacket over my jeans and shirt. Just in time too because a burp somewhere in the bowels of the house turns into a belch and the entire structure drops another foot. Last thing I see before I jackrabbit out of there is the lightbulb bomb-dropping on my shadow that's flinging after me like a goddamn demon. Tripping over uneven ground, leaping clear of the surrounding moat and reaching the tractor as the sky delivers another round of hail and wrapping my arms round my knees rocking back and forth like a child and burying my nose in the collar of Bill's raincoat which smells of pipe and shaving cream and another day's rain.

Chapter 2

The wind's starting to pick up where the shakes left off. I open my eyes to scraps of metal and roof shingles whirling. Survival instincts kick in. This is farm country, so mud will be everywhere. Two options: church, or Ma and Pa. My triangulation points. Strangulation points more like. Still, they're the only ones I know of making any sense. Town's miles away. Church only two. Ma and Pa, because it's only right. I sniff the air, wondering which direction to go first. Never smelt anything like it. Sweat mixed with iron mixed with kelp and there ain't no sea for miles. I gaze at the sky. No sun, no stars, no ship. Nothing to navigate by. The hail's now a manageable downpour and the earth seems to be settling into the mess it's made which is a flood like I've never seen one before. And this wind. Maybe I can find better shelter before evening comes. Hard to tell how long it's been since chaos hit, what with my blackout too, but it's getting darker by the minute. Unsettling as shit not knowing the time of day. My wrist pod is lying on my bedside table at home, minding its own time.

Hey.

Someone swaying in the vegetable patch. I jump out of the tractor.

Hey!

A man with his hand torn from his wrist. Lumberjack shirt and black trousers ragged. Strings of straw escaping his midriff. Mr. Scarecrow, staring at me unblinking. I look past him to something flying towards his head. A knobbly branch whipping right past. Whipping straight towards mine. I duck just in time.

I'm shivering right through. My insides are swirling like this catastrophe, though the elements aren't calling what's happening a catastrophe. They're happily chatting away, still deciding on something. I'm not keen on going anywhere til they make up their minds.

I wait in the tractor til I can't wait no more. Wrapping my arms round my head, I stumble out and onto the flimsy soil and past the scarecrow towards the lane running parallel to the Joneses' property. Through the toothpick remains of their picket fence, finding no lane and no road turning right towards home. Nothing to look at but masses of upturned land blanketed with water. Nothing to hear except rounds of hail punctuated with gaping pockets of silence.

Stunned, I turn left instead, heading towards the tractor trail just visible yonder. It leads to the village stables and the church after that. Looks like I'll be taking the scenic route home. I slip forward. A hundred yards on and the trail is turning into a gutter filling every second now with bullets of water. No sign of tracks, plus the haystacks heaped alongside are melting into thick porridge. I pull my hat strings tighter and keep trudging up and over the clumps of hay, avoiding potholes, panic again bubbling.

Any step could be an inch deep, or hundreds. I keep checking the fields for signs of civilization, for where the up-chucked earth turns decent again. No such luck. The waterworks are painting everything ash anyway, sweeping and blurring my vision. The clouds. I've never seen them hanging so low. Claustrophobic as hell, I ache to fly up and out of those clouds fast as now. I stomp forwards toward the last of the oaks bordering Bill's land. Branches are hanging lame and broken. Trunks are compacted and splintering their own roots.

Gasping. Muscles aching with effort, I plough through the soil relying on instinct to pull me forward. Each step harder, each foothold more a slide into the scum. Next step, and the world's taken right out from under me. My left leg drops five feet into a void. My right bends somewhere at the knee. The rest of me claws at the soupy topsoil. I pull myself up and flop on the lumpy turf, then pound the earth with my fists til it feels my heart's gonna explode over it. I barely notice the shot of pain stabbing my left ankle.

Damn it. I don't care so much about the pain except what it could mean. Already feeling the probable throb that's going to shoot to my head when I try standing up. Sucking my breath, I roll over in the mud feeling too much like a hog and pull my leg up with both hands, grasping my rain boot and easing the boot and soggy sock off. I know enough about broken bones to know what to look for and with relief I want to hoot at, it's only a sprain, if that. I keep my foot raised anyhow. I whisper to my ankle since I got no one else to whisper to.

I don't trust the ground no more so we're gonna crawl to that there oak and we're gonna stay put for a bit. See what passes our way. Hopefully someone helpful.

And crawl I do, boot clenched in mouth, reaching the dented and demented tree that needs a hug just about as much as I do. It creaks under my clutching, or maybe that's the other oaks leaning in for support. A canopy of leaves is keeping the waterworks at bay. Not exactly a silver lining, though a lining just the same.

My throat's grinding for attention. Resting my foot in a spoon of a root, I cup my hands and take sloppy sips. At least there's water. The past couple of months folks had been talking about turning the taps off and living off boreholes, praying for rain day and night and all times in between. Must have prayed so hard, God's forgetting to turn his taps off. I sniff the air. The swampy odor's hitting me hard. A wet rat fermenting in a sewer kind of stench.

Must admit right about now I'm losing patience. I'm within calling distance from the Joneses' and I'm more broken than when thunder struck. What the hell am I supposed to think about that? What am I supposed to do but wait for someone to swing by and lend me a hand and another ankle? There's nothing else to do now except wait. I glance at the sky again. No way still to tell the time. Any time and anything could be hovering above those clouds. Worry creeps in, settling somewhere in my gut. Ma and Pa. My dog. I've got to get home.

I've got to know.

Double boom. Thunder and lightening clapping together, a one-two jab, no seconds between. My body quakes in the rumble. My breath goes AWOL. A screech of wood and an oak in front cracks clean down the middle. I lurch to the side as a slice of trunk splits off and thuds to the ground two feet shy of my own. My heart hops. The ground shudders. I hoist myself up and stagger from the electric-post oaks as another streak of thunder-lightening flares the sky white and the trees skeleton.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Practically sinking til I get to the porridge lumps, til I get to someone waving at me. Bill. Shirt ripped to shreds, pants torn, he's tilting towards, struggling. Calls my name but it blurs in the gale twirling. He points to the farmstead, shouting something. I reach for him, though we're fifty feet from the other. A grimace shaped like a smile and he's reaching for me, too. The rest of him frowning.

He's in bad shape, like the storm is crushing his insides. Can't believe he's still standing. And then he's not. I'm about to make a sprint for him but something takes hold and it's a river of rain, sliding under his feet and taking him along with it. The deluge's bulging with every second passing.

Arms waving frantic, the whole of him drops under the brownest of water and there's nothing I can do but watch him merge with the rapid that's now snake-tonguing in two directions, one tongue swirling him away, the other careening towards me. I stumble back to the oaks, for a mad moment wondering what's worse, drowning or frying. A glimpse back and the river's still careening but changing tack, joining the ditch by the flattened fence meant to house horses long gone.

I catch my breath. Call it right back. Sweep my eyes over the immediate surrounds and spot the Joneses' rusty post box dented to hell, the little red flag pointing up in surrender. I retrace my steps, dodging the snake, forcing my way back, my gut leaping with every thunder crack, my eyes blinking with every bullet. Almost at the property when the ocean of storm decides to retreat. Wind's still howling but the hail is light-switching off and the clouds hang, deflated.

I arrive at the yard within greeting distance of the disemboweled scarecrow now slain on the ground. Legs and arms shot from their pockets. Wrists too. I stumble past, avoiding eye contact, calling out for Betty in the direction of where Bill was pointing, close to the crack carved in the vegetable patch. I survey the wreck. She could be lying ten feet away and I wouldn't notice. There's bumps of land and bulges everywhere.

The vegetable garden looks like a tossed salad minus the salad. The crack, a blackened grave. Storms catch in this valley like flies in a bowl, humming for days. But I've seen nothing as ugly as this. Not by a long shot. Tying the hat strings tight under my chin and stitching my elbows to my ears, I zig zag closer and peer at the blackness, bile rising to my mouth. Nothing visible but roots and worms. I wipe my lips. Exhale guilty relief. Looking up, I spot some corn stalks near the forest edge distracting and wagging in the gale naked as pigs. I make my way over and trip over a decent-sized potato lodged in a tree stump, plus another two by accident when Bill's boots trip over them. My ankle's moaning but I stumble on, working my way around to the back of the house. The whole left side looks worse than anywhere else - completely crushed. Shoulders slumped, I whisper a sorry to the Missus, retrace my steps and pluck and pocket the potatoes and make my way to my rock standing feet away.

After hauling myself up and over its wonky ledge, I scour my surroundings, eyes locking again on the tractor. Surely, Bill's Swiss Army is hiding under the seat, along with a box of matches and his stash of tobacco. Cursing my lack of forethought, I grab the potatoes from my pocket and stare at their dirt-pocked skin, realizing I'm not hungry but starving and then it hits me. The storm must have knocked me out hours ago. Maybe even yesterday. I'm never this empty after one of Betty's stews. Panic hits me then, too, right through. I try breathing steady, rubbing my goosebumps smooth, my body aching in places I didn't know it could and my forehead pounding like I've just been through a tumble wash. Guess I have. Closing my eyelids to the rising dread now drumming my head, I tell myself to get a grip, and get moving.

I swing my legs over the ledge, knocking the potatoes. They roll like heads landing splat in the mud pit below. I leave them put. I ease down on my strong foot and pitch backwards, grimy water tidal-waving my boots. One step taken and I'm already on the back foot. Three miles. Three miles I gotta tread to get back home. Releasing my squelching boot from the puddle, I use what's left of the stepping stones and get to the tractor, crouching under the seat and collecting the goods, then watch my footing as I turn right where the lane should be, the wind now a rasping cough. I reorient my nerves. The Joneses' property and fields beyond is where the demolition site began and ended. No doubt folks nearer the village are enjoying their morning's breakfast, or lunch, or dinner - wherever the day is now. I'm fretting over nothing. My head's got to think this way or else I'll fret over everything.

Behind me, the river's turned into a tidal pool, swirling back in on itself. I take a moment to look for Bill as though he'll just bob up any second, smiling like he usually does. But reorientation only goes so far. I walk past, tears welling, the ground rising a little higher and dryer as I push on.

A quarter mile or so, and I do a double take. Someone's leaning against a truck. Twenty yards yonder. A woman. Gangly and bent over, hands latching her knees and eyes fixed on the ground like she's searching for something. A mop of red hair dangling over her shoulders, the ends almost touching her knees. She rises slowly and looks straight at me but then right past. I turn my head to where she's staring and there's nothing except soggy bushes and a horse plough tipped on its side. When I turn back, I'm all she's staring at. She leans away from the truck, almost falling face first in the muck. Arms reaching to her sides for balance, she staggers forth, dress hanging loose around her body, arms now locked straight in front, zombie-style. And that isn't red hair anymore, but blonde streaked with blood. I step back, imagination crawling.

Help me, she rasps, eyes glazed and staggering closer.

I stay put, ready to bolt. When she gets within striking distance, her eyes turn human and she trips forward. I just about manage to reach out and break her fall. Blood smudges on my forearms. There's lines of red dripping down her own. I follow the lines to a shard of glass twisted in her left ear.

Help me, she moans again.

More shards stuck in her crown as fresh dye spills. I steady her upright and she pulls her fingers through her curls like she's trying to pluck the shards out. I brush her fingers away gentle.

Just hold on now, I tell her. Hold on.

I start digging in my pocket for my socks to use as a bandage when the woman sways forward, throwing me off balance. Her matted hair parts way to a rivulet of red sliding down the right side of her neck where another wedge of glass is twisted, though this one bigger and leaving enough space for liquid to gush. An odd gurgling leaks from her throat. I steady us both, but somehow she landslides from my grip, sinking in an earth all too willing to swallow her up. I search the fields, frantic. Surely there's others close by who must be seeing this. Must be running over now to help. Why's there no one running over? The woman twitches in the soil, dress soaked in crimson splotches, face caked in dirt. She's looking sideways, away from me, and I want to look away too but I can't, because I'm all she's got.

It's OK, I whisper, kneeling and placing my hand on her shaking shoulder. It's OK.

More twitches and gasps for breath, then a last twitch, slackness, then stillness. Except for the blood. The woman's blood is still alive and blooming color into a world gone dead and still busy dying.

Chapter 3

Am I at the beginning, ending, or somewhere in between? The way the sky looks now, I've never seen such hues. Peacock blue fanning over a line of dark chalk. Is this hell on earth? Or earth on hell? Or is earth long gone and I'm standing on something else? But I'm still here and I'm walking and shifting. Or maybe things around me are shifting. Summer-muggy on the outside but shivering on the inside, shivering something nasty. Stuck in a desert of crud - soot colored - like the soil's been caramelized on top. A thick layer of burnt. Opposite things swapping round and I'm seeing things alright. I'm seeing things.

Like this path. Is this a path? A few soppy bushes flanking either side. Sky sizzling. Clouds dripping. Earth sponging it all up. How long's it been, this walking and watching? Walking and watching and seeing and stumbling.

Gotta get home. Even though home's about as comforting as a rock with no openings. Where else am I supposed to go? I breathe deep, inhaling the sodden fumes of the stinking earth. I keep expecting someone behind me. Keep my senses peeled for him or her and my imagination's doing a fine job of filling in the gaps. Every step taken I'm convinced is being watched. Any minute now I'll be grabbed and pulled under and pulverized to nothing. I'm walking on two feet, the left ankle pinching but stable enough. I'm walking in Bill's boots and I've walked past his farmstead and that dead woman and I'm heading home. At least I think I am. My brain's gone a bit dizzy from shock.

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Can't believe only a few days ago I was helping a sheep give birth, only weeks after escaping home. The Joneses made space for me and I helped a life come forth, new hope too, but now all that space and life are wiped. Bill and Betty were in town buying supplies for the farm, leaving me alone with Socks. Never keep livestock on our farm, only chickens, and they deliver their eggs neat and packaged, so I felt as useful as a branding iron as Socks widened, pink and pulsing, streaks of red dripping down white clouds of wool.

I knelt close enough by, but she didn't seem to be registering anything other than the task at hand. Then, with a sound I've never heard emanating from any animal before, she dipped her bow forward, forehead touching floor, front knees praying Amen, and grounded right there. A minute or so passed. Next thing I knew, I was holding a sack of bones in my arms, a little mouth squirming for oxygen. Socks started licking its face. Long thick strokes. A nose poked through the membranes, then its whole body wiggled free - legs all angular and chopstick thin and already starting to kick.

*

Anyway, an hour's passed, maybe three, and there ain't one single path or anything telling me which way is where and it's twisting my insides out and my mind around bends I never knew existed.

There's always a road. Always at least a trail or something that takes you somewhere and leads you home. Taking you from places you know and back again. Boring as hell but comforting to think of now that all that knowing is gone.

I turn a hundred and eighty, walk a few steps, turn back around, then come to a dead halt. Someone's definitely following me. Following real close and I've barely started leading. I feel it in my bones like I feel my own veins worming around them. I suck in my breath. Glance back. Get ready to fight. Then it stops. As soon as it comes, that someone following vanishes. I spin round and glare at the deserted space behind me. It glares back. As does the silence. Never seen it stare so loud.

A yell from deep within me from a crazy place, wordless and rising up and out and it's long and loud and scary as fuck and I'm barely done freaking myself out when I crouch and cover my head with my arms expecting that something to come flying but there's nothing. Peeping through my elbows, everything goes back to a silence even more so than before. The worst kind of loneliness. So lonely, it feels my whole body's being hollowed out. And my throat. That one scream had so much in it, there's nothing left to screech out, so everything's hollow inside, hollow without.

I drop to the ground heavy, knees and hands squelching in the mud. I may as well end it right here. Just melt into the mess and be done with it. Been here before and there wasn't even a natural disaster to deal with, if that's what this mess is. I let my knees and hands quicksand sink. So close to letting my head drop, so close to dropping from all fours to flat when I know I can't. It would be like trying to drown yourself which is a damn near impossible thing to do. The only way to kill a reflex like that is to find a rock bigger and braver than you and haul it over your chest. To let someone else do the dirty work and stay the hell out of your own way.

Anyway, the soil's smelling anything but pretty and I almost puke over it before lifting my head to examine the situation. One world's morphed into another and I'm crouching in a race with fuck knows who else with no finishing line and no starting line either. I shudder so forcefully, I've got to hold my head from spinning. It's the strangest thing trying to stay calm while skidding in the slush, in this world that ain't my world once a desert now a flood and I've always wanted to go to the sea and I laugh a crazy kind of laugh thinking I'm finally in one but with no boat or oar and I've survived and surviving but what am I surviving for? My existence was small enough as it was. Only wanted to get out of farming and into the ocean, and now its more or less come to me, and besides if I can't find food or enough clean water then I'm gonna die of starvation or thirst or disease from not being able to wipe my own butt clean. I walk on despite all that yelling and squelching and I'm heading in the direction of home where that direction has always been.

This ain't fear. I've felt fear before. This here feeling is pure terrified. But I'm not collapsing. I'm stumbling more or less straight ahead, more or less where this no-path is taking me and I realize something: people don't move forward anywhere as quickly if contentment's got anything to do with it. Contentment makes you want to lie on the earth and suck on it. It's fear that makes you leap. Far and fast to something less fearful. So I'm leaping as fast as I fucking can.

Then I see it.

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The door's slamming suicidal. The rest of the house is creaking and gasping something rotten. I'm upslope from my farmstead, perched on its doorstep like a goddamn homing pigeon. Guts tightening and nerves surging, I stare from the overflowing stream to the garden and I'm staring at my stream and my garden and the skeleton remains of my already wrecked home. Well, Jesus Christ. If that's what I've been sensing this whole time then I've already lost the race.

The structure's tilted to one side with windows popped out and shingles flown clear. Another slam and I'm scrambling down the slope, practically sprinting, keeping my eyes peeled for any movement. The kitchen's thoroughly pulped and Ma and Pa's bedroom also, squashed beyond recognition. Only the torso of the house appears stable, though the roof's caved in like someone's socked it one. Muscles tense and slippery, I trip towards the tattered remains of the fence and open the gate.

As soon as I pass, I step on bones, either dog's bones or dog bones and an almighty crack lets loose. For a second I think you'll both run out, screaming your heads off, but of course that doesn't happen.

The gate, lopsided as a stroke, swings shut. I stomp over a crisscross of flattened flower beds and lifeless branches and a mine-field of dirty-clean laundry. Have to kick like a madman to release one of Pa's ties that's strangling my right foot. Overhead the sky is streaking white and russet clouds, reminding me of pork scratchings and the rain's dripping sporadically, its taps almost turned off. I take the porch steps two by two and punch the front door open. It slaps back with a loud thud. The quiet that follows is empty, dark, heavy. Dust motes swim around my eyes and I have to adjust for what seems like minutes to the stuffy hallway.

When I enter the main living room, the familiar stench of penicillin-dotted bread blended with armpits smacks me full frontal. My nostrils clench in protest and there you are, Ma, in your favorite apron, crumbling by the back door. Trying to find a way out. I walk a few steps towards you but halt, cringing at what I might see. I turn round and there's your husband in his favorite position sitting by the fireplace, face in newspaper and near enough melted into the hearth. I don't remember his eyes taking anything else in but the news.

Things then are what I imagined they would be. What they always were. Seeing it frozen in time like this though makes my heart singe. A seething, sick sadness. A tidal of tears come rising but they stop at my throat. I wipe my eyes anyhow and step towards the kitchen.

I hear something. A dim groan or a low grumble and I think it's the thickened air coagulating in the chimney or the back door swollen and moaning in the wind until a thinned scraggly ghost of a dog shuffles out of the bathroom, tail wagging like a crooked elbow. Bud's mouth is all wet and smiley. I'm guessing he's had a good drink from those leaks in the bathroom pipes.

Still.

How the hell did you survive all this? I ask, and he howls at me like I'm the first and last alive thing he'll ever see.

He's probably right. Part of me wants to fall on my knees and give him a big old hug.

And part of me wants to eat ya, I tell him as a joke, though I ain't sure he's buying it.

I squat next to him and he licks my hands. A tasty cocktail of salt, iron and dug up potatoes. I ruffle his fur. From my squatting position I notice your eyes, Pa. Or what's left in them. Politics, bulletins, crosswords. Your white knuckled fists still shouting. Still at the ready. Even now I back away.

No need to check your empty sockets. I know they're full of the outside world, too. Of your fallen garden. Of anything other than your internal world of husband, and son.

I tread into the waste of the kitchen. The cupboards are bare or caved in or both. You never believed in hoarding things. Mostly picked stuff fresh from your vegetable patch. A packet of potato chips is littering the ground so I make a grab for it, as well as two jars of beans and one jar of peaches and a stale bread roll burrowing in the nearest cupboard. Throwing the roll to Bud, I head into the passage, past the bludgeoned bathroom and arrive at my bedroom, its walls holding limp but steady.

The door cracks open to a crime scene: desk lamp broken to bits with its bulb dislodged and leaking rust on the carpet. Wardrobe sprung open with chalk-outline clothes lying sprawled on the floor boards. I rush to the bedside table. My wrist pod is smashed between the wall and the bed thrown vertical against it like a stick em-up. I tilt the bed frame, grab the watch and try dialing up anyway. Nothing but static. Cursing, I run my fingers down the wood joints, then under the mattress finding your handgun and Pa's photograph lodged in the planks. I place the photo on the bedside table, check the gun's safety catch, then place it beside the photo.

I catch my reflection in the mirror and my jaw drops. Dark lines of filth everywhere. Dried blood on my forearms and etched across my cheeks like a ritual. Walnut hair tangled a darker wood and the green in my eyes a color I've never seen before - cut jade mixed with lead.

I'm not turning seventeen. I'm turning into something else.

I turn away and grab my backpack from the wardrobe and fill it with whatever I can stuff in there: the jars and chip packet, underwear, shirt, socks, gun. I take Bill's kit off and find my own rain gear hanging on the hook on the back of my door. Tugging dry socks and boots on, I pull my yellows over my jeans and shirt, then heave the backpack onto my shoulders. I gather my woolen blanket lying in a bundle on the floor and bunch it in my arms. One last scan around my room and then I'm done.

Steering past the living room with its chaos of furniture, I get to the back door. To you, Ma. Your face is turning away from me like that other woman. Your eyes are open. I get on my knees and wring the blanket tight. When I'm done wringing, I flare the wool over the whole of you gentle as I can.

Words come and go, so I leave them gone. In their place, grief mixed with something else. Something like relief. A last glance at Pa and I stand up and open the back door, Bud trailing. We weave through the disaster of the garden. Exit the dying gate. Before we pass the fence, I stare at my dog and he stares at me. My words sound like a scratch.

You know something, Buddy? Anyone would think Armageddon's just happened, and I guess it would appear that way if you're looking from outside in. But from where I'm standing, looking from inside out?

All I'm seeing is home.

Chapter 4

Fucking potholes. I keep checking my pockets feeling through the waterproof fabric for the stuff that's gonna keep us alive out here. No idea how far the destruction's spread out and it's getting harder to make like everything's just fine when everything I come across isn't. I've tripped up so many times, wouldn't be surprised if half my belongings were sprinkled behind us, hidden in the sludge. Hansel and Gretel crumbs, though I ain't planning on following them home. Home no longer exists.

It hits me then, the thought that I've got nothing to go back to. Nothing to protect. All a sudden the ground I'm treading on seems less treacherous, the sky less ominous. Next second and we're practically doing a Dorothy and Toto, skipping along our yellow mud-brick road before sighting haystacks leaning at friendly angles. I head towards them for cover, Bud hobbling close. I do a stock take and everything's intact. My attention turns to my stomach.

Only takes a couple days for hunger to burn, don't it? My dog lifts his head. Wags a touch. I give him a pat and unzip my backpack, pull out the packet of chips. Tearing the top with my teeth, a few topple and Bud nosedives. I throw him a couple more, then tilt the bag and chew mouthfuls, the salt and vinegar stinging my tongue.

I've already decided what me and Bud are gonna do. Find the coast. What I was planning on doing anyway after returning home from my stint at Bill and Betty's. After earning enough money to travel with. And this flood may link us right to it. All I gotta do is find a boat. If I can't find a boat, and this disaster's gone further than local and slid the coastline into everything else, well, I'll just dive into the makeshift sea and float away til I float under. Figure by that stage I won't even need a rock. It'll be easy. It'll be like giving up.

I zip up my backpack and tell my dog we need to find a shed or some such for the night drawing in. Rain's dripping like it can't help itself, like a child still learning to potty train. Who knows when it will stop for good.

Leading us on, something rises in my gut - the same creepy-crawly feeling I had when I was walking towards my farmstead. I do a one-eighty and scan the fields. Nobody. Shaking my head, I continue. A hundred yards on, I halt again.

Come out. I know you're there.

Silence, though brewing.

Come on now. I'm waiting.

I try keeping the tremor out of my voice. The feeling's spooky as Halloween and I know I'm not making it up because Bud's ears are pricked and he's looking towards the forest, the edge of which I've been using as a marker all along.

I reach into my pocket for my gun, turn left and start treading where Bud's pricking. I've got a weapon and I'll sure enough use it - have had enough target practice using Pa's beer cans. We're almost at the edge of pines when a rush of sound erupts - twigs snap, leaves rustle and whoosh, out springs something animal and attacking.

I spin round. Run as quick as I can. Out of nowhere, I almost bump into a car that's upright, the driver door swung open like a gift unwrapped. I dive in. Bud leaps too. I thrust him onto the passenger seat. Slam the door shut. The beast, charging so fierce, bangs into the hood. The car jolts and shudders. Something silver flashes.

I clench my gun and open the door slow. Inhale sharp. It is a beast, lying on its side, tongue lolling, pupils glossy, teeth white protruding. A knife is also protruding - stuck in the ground two feet from its shoulder. Silver blade, bone handle.

I blink from the blade to the bison, not believing it's a bison, but it must be. Never seen one up close. Never seen one anywhere. I sit shock still for what seems an age, nerves flying all over the place, waiting for the guy behind the knife to show, deciding what to do about the hunchback. Since the world's gone so topsy-turvy, for all I know, it could have been either attacking or fleeing. And now that I think about it, was the blade aimed at him, or me?

Fuck this.

I get out of the car.

Stay put, I tell Bud, and kick the mound of soggy grass from the bottom of the door frame til it gives completely. I keep it ajar and crouch down, one eye pinned on the forest, the other on the bison. This one's huge. Maybe they all are. Bulbous head. Humped back. A carpet of fur laid over his upper body, a thin layer over his lower. Pug nose and small eyes and thick horns curving. He's panting heavy, eyes circling.

I try thinking straight. Could do with owning a knife bigger than Bill's fingernail file. Could do with the other guy not. I tip-toe around, then closer, the bison watching every step. His gums wet and dripping spit. Tail twitching. I try mustering courage but nothing much musters. I've got a gun ready and waiting but my hands are trembling and my muscles are all wiry and my feet are dragging behind my mind that's also teetering.

A ton of licks when I return to the vehicle. I smear Bud's gob on the black leather seat, feeling equal parts wise and foolish. Leaning back on the headrest, the Ford's in great nick, considering. Luxury model. All dolled up but nowhere to go. I stare at the key stuck in the ignition. It's got one of those good luck rabbit feet dangling from the keyring. Pale Pink.

Nice touch.

What the hell do we do now? I mutter.

Looking out and over Bud's head towards the passenger window, I survey the shit storm strewn around. The visuals: upside down fields, sky as gray as old soup, rivers overflowing like cuts with too much pus. The audibles: Bud's antsy panting and some nearby birds chittering bright and cheerful. Robins, by the sounds. I imagine their chests are puffed out and rosy, either cheering us on or mocking us silly.

I spot something in the rearview mirror. A blade of sorts in the far distance, the silver-tipped end pointing up. A church spire. My church spire. Never been so glad to see it. If we can make it over without being speared or eaten, then we'll have more than enough shelter for the night.

Bud. We're going that-a-way.

Glancing at the lame bison and silent forest beyond, I sense our chance and ease the passenger door open and scoop Bud in my arms. The wind's helping mute our movements. I carry him over the frame and onto the soggy ground like a thief in the night carrying a bag of jewels.

He starts to squirm.

Shhh, I whisper. I know what I'm doing.

Which is a more or less a lie as I've never been doing what I'm doing now. But I keep doing it, keeping the car centered behind us so that we're blocked from view. I'm holding my breath and my dog for God knows how long til I realize we're far enough away to break line and look back. The Ford's a rusty boulder in the near distance, the bison a heaving stone. Same scene, same set pieces, only in miniature, and only one thing missing.

The knife.

Chapter 5

We tread on. Fast.

I release Bud and boot it towards Hawk Hill. Ascending will give us an advantage, plus the ground's turning bog with every step so the best way across is up. Through the first layer of spongy bush and my feet trip over something bulbous and brown camouflaged in the soil. I poke it with my boot where it sinks into the side of a body covered in clogged fur. Badger, or hare. I exhale relief that it ain't human. Bud comes to inspect but I tell him to back off because the stench shouts poison. One step to my left and I almost trip again over another bulbous something.

Moving on, I mutter and hop clear of the gravesite. As I do, Bud charges ahead, splatting soil specks on my yellows. We tread yards up the hill, no sight or sound of anyone following. Hawk's a small enough hike to manage in one go, so we haul it to the top where I do a three-sixty and I'm looking at a nightmare. In front, near the church standing yonder, a crater filled with rainwater is stretching from the church yard all the way to the forest edge, in the same direction as the Joneses'. Looks like a meteorite has crashed clear across, though there's no boulder to show for it. Cars are apple-bobbing in the water. A horse trailer is tipped over the closest edge, its silver-winged doors taking a dip. Further along, on the other side of the cavity, a horse is leaning askew, comatose.

My heart pounds in disbelief. Earthquakes never happen in Overstraddle. I walk the short way over to the west side and the village below is unrecognizable. Sam's hardware shop is almost flattened. The library is flooded. I blink twice at something moving. People. Three middle-aged folks are walking in a tight knot along the main road mostly covered in swamp. The woman's holding what looks to be a cat. The other two men are carrying knapsacks attached to sticks balanced over their shoulders.

Hey! I shout.

One of the men slows his pace, releases from the knot. Spots me waving. An ounce of time and he shakes his head and shuffles back to the others as though nothing's happened. I'm a blip in their slow parade. Out of everything, that's about the scariest thing I've witnessed so far. People too bewildered to stop and think straight. Too ambushed to bridge.

I sigh deep. Pat Bud on the head. He gazes at me with his wide chocolate eyes.

Come on, I tell him quiet. Let's go.

I motion us down the other side of the hill and we descend together, heads hung low. The church looms into view. This close, the spire's an upside-down sugar cone set into mounds of melted ice cream.

Wonder what God would make of that heap? I say out loud.

The entrance and the Sunday school section are smashed. The main body is still standing though sunken. I turn my focus on how I'm gonna get us around that crater which is sandwiched between hill and church. If anyone's following now, they won't get far. The fields at the bottom are as treacherous as that funnel of water. We'll be mistaking water for ground and ground for water.

And we do. We go back many a time before going forward, the tunnel winding this way and that, and after two or three bends, the journey's wearing thin. So's my rain gear which is near enough plastered to my skin. Bud stops to nip some mud clots from his paws while I decant my boots. His ribs stick out as he nips.

They even feed you while I was away? I ask.

He ignores me and starts trotting.

When we get about a stone's throw from the chapel's entrance, I realize we got no choice other than to go through the funnel. No point walking around to the back of the church. River Wren, the largest in the county, runs there and is probably overflowing into this fresh one, the mouth of which is yawning into the drenched rose garden, right up to the iron wrought gates. From this distance, I think about calling out for survivors but any sound will only blend in with the surge of rainwater.

I spot the narrowest bit of the crater about ten feet closer to the gates and lead us towards it. I take off my rain jacket and pull my backpack straps tight around my shoulders and zip my jacket over the bulge. I take off my socks and pocket them and leave my boots on. Nowhere else to put them and I don't feel like walking over anything I might not want to. I roll up my jeans.

Next, I tell Bud what we're about to do. He sniffs the edge of the rushing river and backs up a bit when he sees me dip a toe in. My feet find ground where my eyes see ground, though beyond a few yards there ain't nothing but oily blackness. I try lifting him in my arms but he ain't having none of it.

It's OK, buddy. We go steady. Twenty or so feet is all we gotta do.

I step first. I figure my dog won't do the leading, and if I look back, he won't follow. I'm half way across, the water level no higher than my shins, before Bud finishes his whining and pads in. I turn round to watch. Current's rising to his neck. Fur fanned like a dirty mop.

Come on now. Water's refreshing. You can even swim and swish all that caked in -

My words slide away the same time my balance does. Feet dropping right out from under me like fishing line anchors. Down, down, down into blackness like I've just fallen of a cliff and near enough. There's shallow ground towards the other side, near the shoreline, but too late. This gap has me, pulling me south. The shock and jerk of the undercurrent suck my boots right off. Two seconds later they're bobbing up to the surface - giddy ducks dipping and diving near Bud's head. Whether instinct or a game of fetch kicks in, he springs after one. Next second he's swimming right past, the current catching us both and him spinning around me while his retrieving mouth clenches a boot.

I yell at him, water tipping into my throat. Bud's eyes are bulging and his legs are scrambling for a swimming angle. His head's ducking under the current and the boot is filling and tugging him down further. Games are all gone as far as he's concerned and I've got to act quick. Sweet and sour slime fills my nostrils as I front crawl, my rain jacket bulging and blocking my vision. I grab for his neck and yank the boot instead of grabbing him. Bud spins further down the current and I watch his ribs slam hard into a spin-bottling branch.

Grab on! I tell him, though I'm telling us both, having lost all bearings of where's deep and shallow and where's that dog. Losing sight of him in all the twirling whirling and we're turning a corner in that twisty tunnel death-trap and I seize a spine of a tail and a bag of spindly crustaceans body and I'm towing and hauling and we suddenly dock to a complete stop, Bud's legs flaying on my heaving chest like an upturned crab.

We lay there panting. Then he squirms and coughs up something slimy over my chest as my boots come circling past, one after the other. Gently down the stream. Before they merrily along, I grab them and yank them back. Water squelches around my toes. I sit up and water swirls around my butt and my jacket twists around my neck. My backpack's miraculously strapped on tight though digging into my shoulder blades. I stand up in a child's play puddle and look at the church within crawling distance. The river has curved us right up to its backside.

How appropriate.

I lift my dog in my arms and leap to shore before either of us can decide on doing anything else, telling him that I've got it from here. He licks my cheek and his muscles go limp, though his eyes keeping darting left and right for signs of danger. Bud's not as light weight as he was before, or maybe my arms aren't as strong as they usually are but by the time I get through the ditches of water leading to the chipped-to-bits graveyard, bypassing the River Wren completely, the whole of me is exhausted. Outsides soaked and insides starved. I lower Bud to the ground swearing some rotten.

It's not you, I tell him. It's everything.

He pays no heed and limps ahead, weaving through the maze of grave stones before halting and cocking a leg over a broken one. The wind's stronger on this side, swaying the headstones like they're gonna domino-drop any second, like all God's gotta do is give them a pinky-push.

Go ahead.

There's holes the size of dug out graves where the Wren's tipping over and into them. On second look they *are* dug out graves. Is it my imagination, or am I spotting a few coffins peeking out of the soil? Graveyards ain't spots for visiting at the best of times and my imagination ain't a spot for visiting at the worst, so this sight's as creepy as shit and I'm not hanging around any longer than necessary. I shoot an eye to the church and locate the entrance. Can't hear nobody inside.

A crunch behind me. I spin round and Bud is dangling a gristly knob of bone like he wants to play tug of war. I swallow bile and look sideways in disgust.

Just get it over with, I tell him and he tramples off and starts gnawing like a wild dog. A dog gone wild. I want to look away but something in me can't help but lock eyes on that instinct. Then he locks eyes on me. Stops mid-gnaw and stares with the eyes of a hunter. I will myself to hunt back.

Remember, I got teeth too, I warn him.

He blinks once and returns to his bone, eyes rolling to the back of his head, feasting.

I turn away and tread over what's left of the stone path and enter the building and do a sweep of the dank interior. Most of it's been damaged by the flood - swollen timbers and stone columns toppled. Nothing flies at me except empty silence. Silent as the Almighty himself. My heart breathes relief and disappointment all at once.

Anyone here? I ask the emptiness.

It answers in dying echos.

Bud drops the bone by my feet, darts past me and skids to the pews, sniffing each row and then the red carpet snaking up the aisle. Following him, I wade through a wash of water and glance up at the stained glass windows. Stained alright. Hazy sepias bruised and muddied.

Welcome to the house of God, I mumble.

Wrapping my arms around my chest, a haunted chill seeps deep. I turn three-sixty slowly, making sure nothing's gonna spring out at me. Startle when I see a man hanging from a roof beam at the other end of the church, naked except for a loincloth plus nails dug into his palms and feet. A second look to make sure he ain't real. Wonder for a second if he ever was. Wonder not for the first time how a man could ever go through such a thing as to end up pinned to a tree. His eyes are gazing at his feet and gazing beyond them and I almost ask him how he does that - make suffering look so human.

Leaving him in peace, I turn back to the pews and strip off my clothes. Shed them like unwanted skin. Then I un-peel my backpack and place the contents on a pew and take stock. If this is all we've got to live on, we ain't gonna be living for long. My world has all a sudden become what's existing on this bench. A closing in of, and a rapid shrinking.

Shoulders slumping heavy, bones shivering in the clammy dampness, I sigh loud and place my bits in a line. Count and turn each item over, then place them back again, putting my jackknife in my outside pocket for easy reach. Smelling the tobacco is making me crazy hungry so I reach for the plastic pocket and pinch a wad and plop it on my tongue then tuck it into my cheek like how Bill does. Digesting all that honey-cedar richness through my gums. A momentary satisfaction until the door we traipsed through slams shut, turning everything black. I jump back. Eyes fixed on shadows. On darkness and dust. Fear oozing like an illness. Shins colliding with Bud's hind-legs. We scatter like spiders.

Git, I bark at him, then shoo him away.

Panic's deciding things for me now, rippling like that crater-tide. I surge towards the pulpit and hide behind it, expecting the door to open and the knife-man to come running. When nothing happens, I search the lectern cupboard, frantic. There must be something in here to lessen the creep and lighten the place up. First drawer I open and two candles roll forwards. Hallelujah. I lift one out along with a large box of matches sitting in the near corner.

I tell myself to get a grip before anyone else does. With trembling fingers, I try lighting five or six matches before one strikes. Searching for a candle holder, I find one right under my nose standing next to the wilting flower arrangement. I twist the wax into the holder while noxious smoke rises. The flame makes a halo of Bud's head. He's pawing a knoll of gum near the second row of pews.

My breathing more regular now, I spot a stash of logs stacked for the ready in the fire grate chiseled into the north wall. I grab my clothes, then walk back to the fireplace and throw the wet bundle over the stone floor in front of the grate. I light the fire with the matches and start drying myself off, thinking about the timings of things, the basics of what I've got to do now versus what I would be doing on a normal day like eating a proper meal and showering a proper shower and sleeping a proper sleep.

I'm realizing right now and here that I've lost all bearings of ordinary actions and time slots. I'm watching the flames catching and dancing and my thoughts are doing the same. They're rushing over the last couple of days, then ahead to the next few, and I'm wondering what we're gonna find next, and more concerning, what we're not gonna find, and even more frightening, what's finding me.

Bud jolts me out of my thoughts when he pads over, tail between his legs. He raises his paw to my hand with a tongue clacking madly. I lower to my knees and hold his muzzle open, then pry the gum from the roof of his mouth. I'm about to throw it into the fireplace when I realize it's not gum but something flat and oval and egg-white. What do ya know. I head straight to the pulpit again, a memory flashing of Priest Bell placing his box of communion wafers in the bottom cupboard. I'm about to pull the handle when I see it's bolted with a flimsy lock. I grab my gun from the pew and return to the cupboard. Click the safety. Aim to shoot. Then think about it. A butt-naked boy pointing a gun at a pulpit. What would the neighbors think? Plus, the echoing blast would shock Bud clear out of here.

Instead, I place the weapon on the open Bible splayed on the top of the lectern and bang the lock with my fist. It snaps off, rust flaking to the floor. Next second, I'm practically leaping for joy when I see a plastic tub half loaded with wafers. I lift the tub out then open the other cupboard and spot an uncorked bottle of wine hiding in the back. Now I am leaping. I pull it out and jam the head of my gun on the cork. It plops and splats into the ruby juice. A few drops squirt over the opening. The first swigs swim straight from my hollow stomach to my brimming brain. I saunter down the steps with the wafers in one hand, the bottle in the other and sit on the pew, Bud at my feet.

No wine for you my friend, but these we can share. Hell, it's your first communion.

I lower a wafer to his mouth. He swallows it as though I've given him nothing at all.

Yep. Wafers are about the thinnest, no-nothing wisps of air you can ever imagine eating, but I'd be grateful, buddy. This is consecrated stuff.

I place a few on my tongue and chase them with some swigs while Bud raises his paw for more, drooling and leaning real close. I wipe the spit from my knees and look him in the eye.

OK, this is how it's going to go. Three for me. One for you. My belly's bigger, plus I saved your skinny ass from that river, so you owe me one.

I give him a wafer and plop three onto my tongue. Must admit, they're tasting more than palatable with this wine. Before I know it, the tub's near to empty and most of the bottle's gone. I trundle over to a wooden bench near the west wall feeling well and truly consecrated and about to drop off to a welcome doze when I hear slurping. Bud's drinking from the baptism bowl on the other side of the pulpit. Peeling myself from the bench, I hobble over and cup my hands, feeling well and truly parched, but not before crossing my forehead and temples, just for show. Out the corner of my eye, I spot the confession booth and tread over real curious while Bud skitters past and curls his drenched self into a donut in front of the fire.

Never been in the confession booth before and I ain't sure if I'm sitting in the priest's chair or the sinner's cause both sides look the same to me, but I start speaking anyhow, my fingers wrapped tight around the bottle. I down the last swigs then hold it up as evidence. Start confessing.

Excuse me Father, for I have sinned. Drunken this whole bottle of wine here and I haven't saved any for the rest of my life. But seeing as that could mean a couple of days, week tops, I figure you'd be in an understanding mood. And by the way, while we're on the subject of dying and destruction, some indication of what the fuck's happened would be mighty handy to know, cause I've trekked over this much already, with no clue why there's so few folk about, or how far this shit-storm stretches out. So, if you could get back to me at some point between now and now, that'll be just dandy.

I tap the little window and slide it open and peer at nothing but dark space. I lean my head through and rest my chin on the window frame and whisper low.

One more thing, Father. If you could place another flask of wine somewhere in your vicinity by morning time plus a few more of those paper thins for the road, I'd be most humbly grateful.

I tip an imaginary hat towards him and sit there for a while feeling particularly comfortable. Skin warm and insides warmer and my left hand on something even warmer. I start stroking, feeling real good and real sinful all at once. At least I'm in the right place to confess. Still, I stand up and peek my head round the door frame in case anyone's decided on making an appearance cause that would be even more awkward than coming across a guy pointing a gun at a pulpit. And for the first time since disaster has struck, I start howling with laughter which dampens the mood, and besides, my bladder's gone as full as that crater.

Damn it. I stumble out the booth and take a sloppy piss over the rim of the bottle, then head towards the fire. Grab my dried rain jacket and fold its snugness around my shoulders. Eyeing Bud's cozy curl, I stuff the rest of my rain gear under my sleepy head and make like a donut, too. Wind's beating stronger against the church but I'm barely registering. Eyelids heavy with exhaustion and drink, the flames are about the only comforting things to look at within these snuffed out walls, so I wrap my arm round Bud and keep watching til there's nothing left to focus upon except the ashes of my dreams.

*

Thump thump thump...so hard I can't breathe no more. My body's ducking. My mind's rattling through exit points. I reach for the desk lamp and grab it and smash it. Lightbulb shards pierce my finger-beds. Blood drools down my wrist and down his bald spot like an egg's been cracked. Then I'm stumbling and running and exiting.

Last thing I see are specks of glass sprinkling his eyebrows.

Last thing I hear,

I'm gonna kill your ass!

I sprint into the woods with my left hand folded in and stay low under a lumber-jacked log for a long while. Then I crawl to the shed. It's around midnight and the night air is fucking freezing. Once I'm in the shed, all's quiet and hush except for some owls tooting and one heart hooting. I tuck myself into the potato sack and wrap my cut-up hand in one of Ma's handkerchiefs tugged quick from the washing line.

I'm about to nod off good and proper when the shed door nudges open. I near enough shit my pants until I recognize Bud's black as coal nose breaking and entering my secret hiding spot. He's found me. Probably smelt the blood, too. He treads over, sniffing the whole of me before lying near my chest. Bud has found me, so I pull him close and spoon his body.

A warm water bottle for the cold as ice night.

Chapter 6

I jolt upright, disorientated, thinking of punches and jack-in-the-boxes and springing out of them fast but this ain't a shed, it's a church, and I've woken from one horror show straight into another. Shots of rain are dripping over my naked body, random waterfalls are puncturing the wave of wooden beams above. Looks like the roof might give up its fight against a stronger current real soon. I cup my hands and take a drink from the closest leak.

Worry shudders in. How long has that rain been falling? How much land is still around to travel on outside? And how easy can we move past that door we just came through? I almost barf right there just thinking of the obnoxious day ahead, but hold it in and grab instead my clothes from the stone floor and tug them on, shivering.

My dog's by the pulpit, slurping away, but when I walk over to inspect, it's only another shot of rain hitting a puddle behind a broken bulge of stone.

Bud?

I search the back of the pulpit which leads to the back of the church, checking behind the stone coffins, underneath the choir pews, any door or gap that may lead outside, but nothing. I turn round and head back to the pews. The door we came through is slightly ajar, morning light now peeping through. Wind must have knocked it open. I call out for him again.

*

Once my dog got lost. Or maybe it was me being lost. Couldn't tell because I was nine and he was hopeless and we were circling round each other like mosquitos round a net. Kept calling and searching and losing track of that tinny whimpering. Painful in its pleading, irritating in its misleading. Turns out we were not fifty feet from each other the whole time. Got himself trapped in a side-tipped garbage bin and could scamper free any moment, but couldn't due to a clot of kittens skirting around the edge and from where he was crouching, they probably looked like five versions of that giant cat who almost ate him up when he was a pup.

When I finally happened upon him, shooing the kittens away from a game of dead mouse tossing, I gave him a clap round the earhole. Well, a pretend clap, being so worked up with him being so worked up over nothing. I slapped the air instead, then his rump and told him to never leave my sight when we went adventuring.

There's scarier things than felines getting you in trouble, I said.

He seemed to get the gist as he's never veered more than a swimming pool's length since. But that was in another world in another time and frankly, I'm surprised we haven't lost each other already given the circumstances. So all things considered, I'm not worrying, much. He waited for me at home just like I told him to when I went off to Bill and Betty's, so it won't be long before he returns from wherever he's gone and finds me here.

*

I walk towards the door when I spot him crouching under the pew where I inspected my bits upon arrival. He's licking the floor. I stomp right up.

You stealing something from my backpack?

He scuttles out, strings of tobacco hanging from his gums. I do a double take. My backpack's gone - the pew's bare except for one jar of beans. I pick the tobacco packet off the floor. Bud's hardly digested any, but what's left of the brown mound is covered in gobby slime. I toss it aside and pocket the beans, then spin round, rubbing my head, rewinding the tape of events: backpack and bits placed on this pew. Bottle of wine downed on the other pew.

Wine.

Wafers.

Gun.

Pulpit.

Shit.

I sprint through my migraine towards the pulpit, finding the silver metal glinting darkly on the floor. Misty morning light sprinkling right over it. I pick up the gun and matches and slot them in the inner pocket of my rain-gear and check the rest for anything left over and remember my jackknife in the top right inner. Small consolation. I charge to the door, and then around every nook I can find, looking for the bastard.

Fear's turning to anger back to fear. Haven't a clue if the thief is someone new or that same someone whose been following. I keep looking over my shoulder in any case, Bud following my tracks, sniffing, getting nothing. By the time I return to the door, he's on my heels and getting on my nerves. Stinks like wet carpet, besides.

I push the door wide open and smell fouler things. A ditch that looks half moat, half sewage tunnel is flowing by full of soil, muck, and fuck knows what. A mini crater in itself, I can't see how anyone got into the church, or how anyone can now get out, other than swimming along with the current and joining the river beginning at the cemetery gates where the flower garden used to be. The intruder must have entered before it got this bad. We have to leave before it gets worse.

Can't have gone far, I tell Bud. And when that asshole comes round next, he won't know what's coming.

Least I sound brave.

I glance right towards the graveyard. Most of the tombstones have dislodged out of their sockets leaving a gaping mouth of broken teeth and gummy mounds. The marked earth is now unmarked. Forgotten. Blank-slated. Beyond the graveyard, well, there's nothing much to say cause there's nothing much to see except new rivers flirting with the old one. Oblivious to anything wanting to stand still.

My eyes catch on something closer to home, something large and cumbersome drifting by my feet. A vacant coffin with its roof ripped off entirely. Tipping this way and that. Drunk on fluid. It's about to pass us by when its bow lodges in the bank of mud. My insides churn with wine and rotting dread and I upchuck right over it, not meaning to, but having to just the same. I turn my face to the wind, raindrops smearing my chin clean and sliding sideways into my ears, sideways onto an earth slipping away and vanishing, caring little for the living and even less for the dead.

I wipe my face and act quick before the coffin dislodges. Grabbing the stone pillar flanking the door frame, my foot reaches out and manages a toehold. Edging the coffin backwards, I grab the copper handle and heave the whole thing up and onto the top step of the entrance, the ache in my head tossing and turning like the current. Takes an age to tip it but when I do, out spills a bucket of water. Then I tell Bud to jump in. He looks at me like I'm mad, and I may be starting to be so but the only way we're getting out of here is by casket.

Swim or float, I tell him. Your choice.

Eyeballing me for a second, he raises both paws to the rim. I lift his back legs up and over before he changes his mind.

Good boy. We gotta go down this offshoot towards the River Wren which will take us to the coast, is what we gotta do.

Bud looks about as convinced as I feel. I peek my head round the doorframe again to make sure there ain't any last minute alternatives, my fringe instantly plastering to my forehead. Damn rain. At least the sun's making more of an appearance - a highlighter smearing across the Wren.

There's scrapping behind me. Bud's pouncing out of the boat before I even think to grab hold. He darts to the pew and ducks right under it, going nowhere. I watch his head lock on his paws. I watch him watching me. Taking my time, I walk over and lower to my haunches. Level my gaze with his.

The thing is, buddy, we're in this together and you ain't giving up now. We gotta keep courageous. Keep going. Remember my hiding spot on the farm? The shed? Remember Tommy?

Bud raises an eyebrow.

When I was little, before you showed up, me and Tommy used to play games. Treasure hunt, tag, hide and seek. We'd tear around the yard, weave through the half-shaved forest, shout and holler where we were, where we weren't.

Once, when I was hiding in the shed, Tommy yelled,

The sky is falling! The sky is falling!

He was sick of not finding me, so he tried scaring me instead. I shot straight out of my secret spot with the shed door banging like a demon and held my hands over my head waiting for the weight of the world to flatten me. After having buried myself in that dark

cave of a potato sack, I tumbled into all the midday sun and heat and wind and thought, This is it – I'm gonna die - right here, right now.

My eyes burned, my body bent double, I near enough fell flat on the grass I felt so claustrophobic and done. Tommy screamed in my ear a couple of seconds later.

Gotcha!

I sprang up and near as good clapped his ear off with my stronger hand until he pleaded mercy. He never joked about it again.

Now that the sky *has* fallen and everyone's either dead or scrambling around like vermin searching for deeper graves to breathe in, let's just say that when I spit myself of that shed, Bud, I was ten, going on dead, and figured it wasn't a half bad thing, dying - not after I had gotten over the shock of it - which took about a second. Growing up all bent and beaten on an uncrowded farm on an overcrowded planet, I was half-finished already, so who was I to get all worked up about the world giving up the ghost?

Which has been bothering me most given the current state of affairs. Me and you have been stumbling in rust-ridden mud pits, over potholes and other holes, bodies and other bodies, famished and itching all over and *spent* and I'm wondering why, if I was OK to die back then, am I clinging to life now? Why are you? No offense, buddy, but you're a near to nothing drowned rat risen from some God forsaken cesspool. Jesus, I can barely look at you no more. And Jesus knows what I look like cause he ain't looking at me at all.

But we *are* clinging and we can't give up now. It's almost funny, you know. I just keep ploughing ahead whatever it takes. Maybe it's because the before and after ain't so different which makes things even more funny. So that's what we gotta do, you and me. We gotta keep on going. Navigating down that river is our only chance. We're not tempting fate, we're fighting it, and I believe it may be the first time I've ever done such a thing. Now it's your turn. You gonna fight, or you gonna flight?

Chapter 7

I raise up slowly and turn back to the coffin, then make like I'm busy with the satin sheeting - padding it here and there - then step into the hull. A couple of minutes and I hear a soft padding across the floorboards. Nodding in his direction, I speak soft, still fiddling.

So I'll do the steering, you do the sitting. I'm going to lift you in, then push us off with an oar and then I'll hop in and you'll be sitting right here between my legs and I'll be steering. Don't even worry about that rain. The more the better at this stage. Give us more river to play with.

Thinking of that very problem, I glance around and grab a thin plank of wood lying in the near corner. Bud waits and then sidles up a bit closer when I return. I take the cue and lift him in my arms real gentle and lower him in.

See, you don't even smell that bad up close, I say, keeping a hand on his neck and breathing through my mouth.

I step one foot into the middle of the casket and leave one foot out and push with my free hand until the box plunges into the water that's level with the third step down. I swing my leg over and motion Bud to sit between my thighs while I grab the plank with one hand and the rim with the other as the coffin tries to balance itself. The white satin lining shines amongst the surrounding scum. Water keeps slopping in and I keep bucketing it out. Have to crouch dead center with Bud snug tight the whole time. We spin away, wobbly, but upright. I look back at the door and it's still wide open, stuck between a stubborn willow

branch and the second step. The roof resembles a giant soaking wafer. By tonight it may give completely and the stone floor will no doubt be flooded, those pews parted by a floating red sea carpet.

Returning to the task at hand, I hold the plank clumsy over Bud's head and let the current do most of the work until we get to the church gates where I've got to twist and turn us past the flattened flower garden and into the wider Wren. As we turn, the current takes over. No chance of grounding now.

Racing along with Bud's head tucked tight to my chest, I've never realized the Joneses' property was down-slope from the church. I wipe drops from my cheeks that ain't the weather's while catching glimpses of their tattered home slumping behind the slanted oaks. They were trying to help me get out of Pa's grip, if only for a few months. Bill was getting on, but he could have done most of that farm work blind. He asked me what I was going to do when I returned home and I told him I was going to collect my things and take the next train to town, then to the coast and set sail. He asked if I was going to join the Navy and I said I wanted to sail, is all.

And look at me now - taking the helm in a coffin. Not exactly what I had in mind. I turn away from the Joneses' ruins and gaze back at the church, an uneasy feeling creeping into my upchucked belly. I ain't sure who or what, but something's still lurking. I stare at the mounds drifting away from us. A black dot on the horizon. A lost ship sailing nowhere, its tilted mast spiking the air. Its anchor line somehow umbilical-cording my gut, tugging and pulling. I shudder at the feeling, wanting clear of the ghosts haunting that place. Of the ghosts haunting me. I squeeze my dog's ribs with my knees, keep my eyes looking forward.

We're doing just fine, buddy. We must have ditched that thief and we'll get to the coast eventually. Just need to find some food and a bit of help along the way.

Sighing heavy, I keep balancing and moving us forward. After a long stretch of ragged steering and watching all sorts of shit pass by - tires, cookery utensils, swollen and sinking books - Bud pokes his head out for a bit of sightseeing as I steer us past the eastern side of the forest, past one decrepit farm after another. Hunger comes rumbling. When the river turns a slow bend, I lay the plank down by my feet and dig into my pocket for the jar of beans. Have to act fast as the coffin's still rocking. About to unscrew the lid when Bud knocks it clear out of my grip with a jerk upwards. I grab for the jar like a man possessed. It ricochets off my frantic fingers and splashes in the river, our boat almost toppling in the

process. Two seconds later, and the amber glass blends in with the coffee-grit water, then disappears.

Damn it.

I glare at Bud, then yank him back to my thighs, then spot what he's spotting. Beavers. Building a dam of sorts on our port side. Doing what they always do. I keep one grip on my antsy dog, the other on the oar, and we watch as one beaver paddles back and forth with sticks while the other keeps house. They don't so much as blink at us, but so distracted at the sight of them, I almost don't see the rowboat a quarter mile downstream, docked like a picnic. There's an artery where the river's sloshing up a ramp-like incline leading directly to it.

My belly and muscles need a pit stop. I wait as the river pulls us past the beavers and closer to the ramp. When the gap comes, I jiggle Bud free of my hold and maneuver the plank towards the artery, using all my might against the stubborn current that's come to life again and pulling us the other way. I think for a split second about who to chuck out first then toss Bud, telling him to jump. I leap out after him and grab at the coffin but it bottle-spins away and hurtles away.

Cursing my way up the slope, my knee scrapes something hard. I stand up and rub my torn skin. Bud licks the patch dry. I step past him towards the rowboat, expecting a picnic basket or something as civilized, but it looks long deserted and there's nothing in its belly apart from a titchy oar lying flat along the floorboards.

Hands on my hips, I turn towards the thinning forest. There's a clearing beyond where sunlight's trickling in. I lead us over the bran-flake ground, upturned roots and downturned branches our welcome mat. Leaving the pines behind and walking towards the clearing, there's no one around. I breathe deep. Something about the rain falling soft and the sun splintering through the sky, the pine needles making everything hush and tranquil like they always do. After that mad rush of river besides, you could say this kind of quiet is akin to peace, but that would be crazy. Refuge, though that would be fool's talk. To be left alone is something I've always wanted. Not *this* left alone, but for a moment, even with my stomach screaming for company, the rest of me's settling down to a silence I've never settled into before.

Then as quick as that feeling comes it leaves. Flies right on by. Bud snaps his head a second before I do. Something rustling in the distance. Bigger than a bird, smaller than a man, larger than my imagination.

Who's there? I call out, body spinning around.

Maybe a dart of something, maybe a flutter right over there behind that bloated bush. Bud kinks his paw. Freezes. Whether he's frozen in fear or still assessing, I haven't a clue, but I step towards the sound.

I was sure we were alone. Fear creeps up again. I glance at Bud. His paw's still cricked and his tail's pointing madly. If that rustle's a deer or similar then I'll pull my gun out faster than a Western and shoot the damn thing. I pace closer to the bush, feet tripping over ground that's buckled and swollen like a boxer's spine. I try focusing but a memory comes rippling to the surface, distracting me to no end. A memory of one of the few fights I've won since Pa shoved me in the boxing ring.

*

In our neck of the woods, you can start fighting early, which means you can hit someone dead before you hit puberty. That fight I won, I was fourteen going on starving, almost as starving as now. Can practically hear Pa shouting to the top of my head. A muffled shout. Far away and far too close. A fuzzy foghorn blasting in, blasting out.

My face was stuffed in his belly, in our corner of the ring, smelling his sweat, my gloves not even able to wrap round his waist. I hung them on his hips til he pushed them down. Then he grabbed my upper arms and it was a welcome relief to be held up like that, almost off the floor. A dangling puppet. The position made my chin drop and my attention swim to my boxing shoes, and I always thought that was something. How boxing shoes can stay so white despite what's going on above em. Like butcher's gloves before a slaughter.

You gotta give more than that, Pa spat.

He fired me a savage look. A look that tried to get me up and going, though he didn't get much of a chance on account my eyelids felt the size of watermelons so I couldn't see squat. I said something but I wasn't sure what I said cause my ears were also clogged. Pa couldn't hear anything either what with my slug tongue warbling all about. He stuck the water spout in my mouth and washed out my gunky spit while I tried swallowing. Next thing I knew, Pa was spinning me round again to face Big Jim's corner. Jim had his red

towel draped over his giant head and the coach was kneading his shoulders and was looking over at us all smug.

Pa pinched my cheeks.

You get down the neck of him, you hear me?

Then he muttered something else sharp in my ears,

You win this or you don't eat tonight.

Then he patted me on the rump and I stumbled from my corner like a drunkard, swinging aimless, Jim coming at me. The stride of a champion. A mad moment thinking I could just fall to the floor and play dead, then the bastard would have a good sniff and leave me alone...*Hey Pa, look, a new boxing move...*but the moment passed as soon as it arrived cause Big Jim out of nowhere punched me in the gut as close as close could get to just below the belt.

Referee Rob's whistle.

Above board!

Sounded like *all aboard*. Wished it was. Could have sailed right on out of there. Referee turned Captain. But Rob turned no such thing and Jim grunted and nodded and came at me again though next time slower. Drawing it out, enjoying the kill. I was still bent double by the last punch so I staggered to his left without raising my head. Jim was a couple feet away but next thing I knew, my feet were falling over each other and my body was flopping to the floor and I was gasping like a caught fish as the referee hopped it to me, wagging his finger over my gaping face.

One...

I tried telling Rob it was my feet not my head that went and tripped me up but he wasn't hearing none of it.

Two...

My mouth kept blowing bubbles.

Three...

I was falling again. Down through the ring floor, through the earth to its goddamn core. The cold numbness felt nice, then.

Five...

I so wanted that count to keep counting and be over with.

Six...seven...

But then Big Jim stomped over and just as I raised my head to give him a congratulatory thumbs up, he did something real stupid. Made a grinding motion with his jaw and spat on my shoes. A big brown wad of gob on my butcher-white clean shoes and flames went up within me. I got to my knees at nine and rose to full height. Eyes clear. Everything clear. Rob grabbed my wrist and looked into my pupils and he must have seen flames too cause he leapt out the way in no time. Jim paced around me, alive with the challenge, swiping his gloves at pretend mosquitos just for show. I kept my breathing steady, my muscles ready, my feet in one spot waiting for the bull to charge.

Sleazy smirk and he bolted. With what was left of my sense of timing, I used his force and my right hand at just the right time in just the right gap just between his jabbing horns. Hooked my fist dead center under his big fat dripping chin, hitting his sweet spot and then some. Jim's eyes lit up. Shocked, dazed, done. Dead weight log timbered to the floor. Then it was his turn to be wagged at. I looked from Jim, unconscious, to the crowd, crazed, to Pa, who was whooping and holding me up again. Bouncing me under my armpits like a new born babe.

But I didn't care about any of that. Of the cheering and the celebrating and being treated like I meant something. All I thought about was how for the first time ever my stomach would have something to chew on afterwards.

*

The rustle's clear gone by the time I get past that memory and to the bush. Bud's sniffing around, but all that gets us is a dead robin lying on its back with its claws clenching the air and its belly pop-corning flies.

Walking on, we tread past more bushes to a running stream yonder, clear enough to drink from. I place each foot in front of the other, tentative. The ground's turning softer and spongier all the way up to the bank of mulch. I get on my knees and drink up. Bud also. Then I spot an apple tree. Apple trees are rare in these parts. The droughts over recent years haven't helped much, either. I tread over and touch it tentative, expecting the bark to be made of mush and my hand to pulp right through. All deserts have mirages. Yet it's solid like a tree and smells like a tree, so I wrap my fingers around a low hung apple and then I do get mush. Rotten, the lot of them. Cursing, I turn round and slide my back down the trunk. Feels good to have something to lean against. My hands drop to the ground, legs stretching out like an Allen key, offering the trunk all my weight, trusting that this thing's

got roots running deep, roots holding it up strong since all the strength I didn't know I have is draining clear out of me and flowing into the soil.

Then hunger hits right through the whole of me and just as I think it my head cracks open. Holy Shit. If I wasn't dead before, I am now. My hand shoots to my temples expecting a spill of brains. I blink, not wanting to see the guck and anyway my vision's distracted by something rolling away and I freeze for a shock second certain that the something is my head but I'm clenching my own and I'm looking at an apple. This one perfect and ripe. A few other ripe ones dangling in my periphery, high up and clear out of reach.

I grab the fruit before it rolls to the ditch then wipe the grime away expecting the green to wipe off along with it or something as strange yet the skin stays green and even tastes like an apple. I spit the first bite out in any case, making sure it doesn't have the worms of the dead or some such wriggling round. Surprised when the flesh inside is tinged with the usual clean-green so I chomp it down.

The meaning ain't lost on me though - the eating of this apple. But if this here tree is the tree of knowledge then screw me I don't want any more knowledge what-so-fucking ever and am I now doomed? And how can I be when I'm doomed already and where's that snake and where's the hell's God for that matter cause he ain't warned me about nothing. Sitting quiet now, waiting for poison to fill my veins and the sky to fall down further or some such terribleness, something even more disastrous than has already happened, but the only thing causing any fuss is my grumbling stomach wanting more.

Another twenty yards of keeping to the sparse line of apple trees and I spot a flagging orchard. Ghosts of peach trees and apple trees and cranberry, too. Lots of little floods speckled round but there's spots of land running alongside. A big beauty of an old apple tree catches my attention straight off. One that can just about house a man and his dog. There's a carved out hollow in the decaying trunk surrounded by mushrooms - the non-poisonous kind - and an overflowing but manageable brook plus an overhanging rooftop of branches connecting with a decaying peach tree. Just short of paradise as far as I'm concerned. Maybe I've officially gone mad, and maybe I got those mushrooms wrong, but it's like I hear a moaning and groaning in the wind, coming from the tree, calling us over and begging us to take shelter and eat its delectables.

I rush to its base and start collecting the goods. Bud circles round yapping like a wanna-be banshee. Pawing and licking my fingers like I've got a three course meal growing on them.

Shoo.

I bat him away and scour the ground thinking there must be something good and smelly down there as that's where my hands are resting but there ain't nothing close by except dirt and slimy things, like the soil has wormed up everybody and gone stirring them about the place.

You want one of these? Is that what you want? I ask him, sticking a mushroom near his nose.

He stops licking and whines and tilts his head to the sky. I crank my head and almost fall backwards. A creature is hung over a droopy branch like a disemboweled organ. Looks fresh enough to cook on a fire.

Protein. That's what I keep telling myself. I need protein and that's what I eat all the time. I pat Bud's head, reassuring us both, and start preparing the ground with some sticks from the dry innards of the tree, then grab a few matches and the jackknife from my pocket. Despite the dampness in the air and all around, the fire springs up easy. I kiss the matchbox and stuff it back in my inner pocket.

It's the simple things that keep you alive, my friend, I tell him, plus whoever's hearing. All a man's gotta do is think a little, pocket some essentials, and keep the fuck going.

I walk over and lift the animal off the branch half expecting it to seam-split in my grip but it's doll-floppy with fur as soft as sleep. No smell, no damage. She's female by the looks of her undersides. Despite skin rolling easily over her bones she's a tubby one. Cheeks nut-chubby and body nice and plump as though she's eaten all those stored acorns. Who knows. Maybe she did. Maybe Momma Earth spewed them up in her hissy fit and Ms. Squirrel had her last supper before tossing herself over this branch and dying right there waiting for someone to pass by and wonder at her.

Bud's almost treading on my feet he's so curious. I tell him to scoot and lower myself on my haunches and lift the squirrel's chin and scan her some more. Everything's intact save a few scratches running up her hind-legs. Her eyes are open but then squirrels don't blink much on account they're always watching for danger. My belly's growling big time.

Still, I can't help staring into those wet jets for a few moments. Into all that observing brightness.

Feels like she's still in there looking out at the world somehow, I tell Bud soft.

He's ogling the critter like he can't believe she's up close. He chases after them something crazy. Paws the tree trunks which offer about as much use as emery boards, yaps as his prey spirals clear from dog-shot, every single time. It must be real strange for him, cause it is for me, handling this one as though we're visiting a petting zoo. Shouldn't be allowed to do this. It's like we're cheating, trespassing on some ancient game, breaking the rules.

Squirrels always get away.

In any case, Bud's got long dreadlocks of drool dangling from his chin, thinking of more practical things, so I place the creature back on the branch and tell him to settle down while I think things through. I don't know if I can go through with it, but I start preparing the tools anyhow. I first dip my jackknife into the flames to sterilize it, then walk over to the brook and fill a dug out knob of branch with clear enough water. I turn back to the fire. I hate doing the skinning thing and only tried it once when Pa forced me to, but now I'm grateful for the knowing.

Skinning a squirrel must be the same as skinning a chicken, just with less feathers getting in the way. I lift her down carefully from the tree and place her between my legs as a grip hold. Then I hold my breath and make a small cut just above her butt and pull the red-bush tail clear over its head and peel the roly-poly fur. When I get to the front, when the fur's all off and she's as naked as daylight, I notice shapely bulges that ain't acorns at all. I brush my fingers over the swellings. A brush of a slit across her abdomen and five babies come tumbling out, spilling onto the ground. Something cuts in me so deeply I can't almost bare to look. One eye squinting sees they're almost ripe. Small bodies, fully formed, waiting to hatch.

Born blind, deaf and completely helpless, Pa's gum-smacking words clap my ears.

What did he know about animals anyway?

*

Pa and me found Bud orphaned alongside the stream running to our farmstead. He was three, maybe four weeks old, a tiny nub of a thing, which is maybe why he got left behind, though he was being kept company by a giant of a cat who was playing with him

the way it would a mouse. Clawing and springing and deciding on what to do next. Pa told me to let the cat have him. Decided Bud was too worthless to even worry about. His little eyes looked blind shut, tiny button nose almost torn off.

I returned to fetch him a quarter hour later when I was supposed to be chopping wood, finding the cat gone. I scooped him into my shirt and hid his shaky self in the shed, in some towels, plus a bit of hay with a tick-tock clock I saw on some old dog whispering show on an antique TV, just to let him know there was a heart around. He survived mostly by keeping quiet. Suspect the bark was shot right out of him when he was living by that stream when he realized making loud noises would get him the wrong kind of attention. I introduced him to Ma and Pa when he was a stronger thing a few weeks later, when Pa spotted him dashing after a butterfly around the duck pond. Ma smiled and gave him a little pat. Pa only shrugged, saying he didn't want anything to do with him, which I took as a yes to keeping him.

*

Anyhow, Bud springs forward like he still does with butterflies or anything buzzy, his black nose to brown baby bulbs, sniffing their iron-rich world. Next second he's glancing up like he's asking permission. Prodding a few, he turns them over like he can't stand to chew em. He lets them alone.

Teeth clenched and mind clasped, I bury the babies by the tree, then toss my dog some de-furred skin and fat and other bits while I clear the creature out. I wash her insides and tie her squishy paws with string and skewer her with a thick stick. Then I stare at the sky, mostly, while I heat her body over the fading flames. The clouds have cleared up some and the rain has reduced itself to an end of a long piss dribble. The ship's still lost at sea, but whatever else is hanging around up there looks a little less ugly which is a little more reassuring. Some peachy light's been thrown in so it must be sun-setting time. I hang my shoes and socks on a nearby set of logs next to the fire.

When I tend to the squirrel next, she's overcooking but I'd rather burnt than bloody. I take her off the spit and eat quietly, chewing slowly. Half way through, I find myself offering a prayer to Ms. Squirrel on behalf of us both. Thanking her for her life. Her little lives. I reckon it's the first prayer I've ever made that truly means something.

About a quarter hour later, Bud belches something foul but seems comfortable enough. He wanders a rope's worth away to cock a leg before padding over and laying his

head in my lap. He's out for the night. Same thing happened last night. Couldn't budge him come hell or high water and both were threatening. I take a few small sips of water from the knob and wipe my lips with a cleanish leaf and carry Bud to the tree hollow and lay my head on my arm and spoon my reeking dog.

Maybe I hear it in my dreams. Maybe I say it before I drift off to a welcome sleep. But the last thing that happens before the world turns dark is me deciding something solid and then saying it:

Bud. No matter what, I ain't never gonna eat you.

Chapter 8

I wake up with a start. A purple line of pre-dawn is scouring the inky darkness. Night's dreaming was full of nasties. Cracks running down the sky, rivers soaring above ground, wild beasts running after me, me running after them. Pa's voice screaming in my ears. Ma's whispering through the shed,

It's OK, son, you can come out now.

I close my eyelids and listen to the trees talking, the birds greeting each other like nothing's gone wrong. Then I fall back asleep. When I wake up again, dawn's arriving and Bud's departing, growling behind the line of purple that's all a sudden focusing to a point and I'm staring at my gun that's staring at me and at the end of that, a girl glaring.

Don't move.

Like I can. She's got me jammed inside a tree trunk and the only way out is through a black hole. Bud moves, though. He gets to the girl's side in a flash and growls up her nose.

She jolts backwards, tripping to the side. Recovers quick and aims the gun shaky, eyes darting between me and Bud.

Git. Back. Here. Now. I tell him firm.

Bud blinks. Growls again. Pads back.

Stand up, she says hoarse.

I squint at her.

You just said don't move.

Get out of the tree.

Her face scrunches and I lean forward, then crawl out and rise up, pinning Bud's weight between my thigh and the trunk.

What do you want? I ask gruff.

She's staring at me, wide-eyed. I wrap my jacket tighter round my chest and breathe in the windless air, stale now, and cold from the night. She's porcelain pale, like someone's taken her off a shelf. Blonde hair. Bordering white. Thin neck coiled in a plum colored scarf.

She had the guts to steal my weapon but she's about to topple in a stiff breeze. Fragile ain't the word. Splintery, more like. Makes me want to go over and catch her before she breaks. Either that, or grab my gun and shoot her, which is looking more likely. She's not ten feet from me. The gun nine.

Leave me alone, she says. Quit following me.

Her pupils are sparking fear and something else. Something like rage. Not the type to ignite.

I hold steady. The evidence couldn't be more obvious if she tried. I tilt my head to the knife at the ready in her other hand. Silver blade. Bone handle.

You sure about that? I ask, cautious. Cause I'd say you've been the one following me.

She flicks a glance downwards.

Was at that car first, she says stubborn.

I keep my voice calm.

You took my backpack.

Her shoulders drop.

The light in that church. Those candles. I thought people were in there.

Am I not people to you?

Her lips draw a line. Bud's pushing at my legs but I keep him pinned.

You had this on you.

She points my gun at my chest. I flinch and lean back against the tree.

Which you've just stolen, I say slow.

I hold out my hand, palm facing up. She doesn't budge.

I saw that coffin span away when you docked. You can have the rowboat. Going to walk from here on.

We lock eyes.

You haven't a clue what's happened here, do ya?

She swallows hard.

Do you?

A chuckle burns my throat.

Does it look like it?

She lowers the gun, stays mute.

Where are you walking to? I ask her.

Home, she blurts, flicking her focus over my left shoulder. The safest route from here is by road.

A road, huh? I'll be darned.

What about you?

What about me?

Where are you going?

I cock my head.

Anywhere *but* home.

Silence. I break first.

Why'd you steal my gun?

Wildfire in her eyes.

Because you stole my tree!

She shouts it so loud, birds scatter from the neighboring branches. Bud also darts to the left and after them. When he circles back, he starts wagging at the girl like he can't help himself. The sight calms me enough to say it polite.

People don't own trees.

Not calm enough. Her body twitches and she stamps her foot like a tantrum, yanks at the zip in her shorts, drops the knife in her pocket, then raises the gun with both hands, aiming it direct at my chest.

Leave, she snarls.

Alright. Alright.

Her grip is all wrong and she hasn't pulled the catch but she's still holding my gun and there's no way I'm leaving without my gun.

I'm sorry I overtook another one of your shelters. OK? And I know it looks different, but I promise you, I haven't been following anything but my own shadow since chaos hit. Me and my dog will leave right now, but I need to get back what's mine. I'll show you how to take the bullets out just now and then you hand them to me and I'll pocket them and the gun and then walk away. Deal?

She starts chewing her lip, unsure, glancing at Bud.

Look, I need my possessions back. I've been pulling myself through this desperate situation same as you have, and I'd probably have done the same things you did if I kept bumping into me all the time, but now we have to move on. You helped with that bison. You wouldn't have done that if you wanted me clear gone.

Her glare cuts deep.

I was worried for your dog.

I squint at her.

You don't trust people much, do ya?

I step forward.

Stop right there, she says, pupils alighting.

Seven feet.

I'll shoot. I will.

Six. She's smaller the closer I walk.

Five. My heart's pumping and I can tell hers is, too.

Four feet and we both freeze.

She's not going to shoot. Something about her eyes tells me so. Something behind the wildfire is so shot and wilted, I'm not sure I can keep walking up to that kind of wilt. Not now. Not maybe ever.

A ragged sigh and she lowers the weapon like it's a weight too heavy to hold. I reach out. A tremor of a pause and she hands it over and I dislodge the bullets quick and pocket them and the gun. Her body's rigid but her breathing evens. An arrow of a look and she zips the pocket shut over her knife.

So, all good? I ask her.

Silence.

Well, then.

I turn to go, motioning Bud to follow. He lags back, sniffing at last night's fire, at the tiny volcanos glinting in the ash.

Come buddy, time to shove.

Wait.

I turn round and she makes her way towards a pint-sized peach tree. Starts searching for something behind the stubby trunk. I keep a close watch while she gathers something in her arms and walks over, sheepish.

Here, she says, handing my backpack over.

I shoot her a look, then take the straps and hook them over my shoulders. The bag's a couple of jars lighter in weight.

Next time you want something, just ask for it, I tell her.

She hangs her head, says nothing.

Well, then.

I start walking.

Rowboat's that way, she says, nervous.

I'm not going back to that river until it gets easier to see through.

I keep walking in the direction where I'm guessing the road is, treading softly, listening for either footsteps or a pocket unzipping.

After a few seconds, footsteps. I exhale easier.

One condition, she says at my back. You walk in front of me the whole time.

I turn around. Cock my head. Offer a smirk.

I thought we might be heading the same way.

Which way is that? she asks.

East. To Eashing. Then the coast after that. You?

She hesitates, then divulges.

Close to Shackle Hill.

I know Shackle.

Her face turns ashen.

I hope they made it, she says quiet. You all alone, too?

My turn to hesitate.

I got Bud.

I glance at our surrounds.

What were you doing so far afield?

Was walking, she says. Foraging, mainly. The sky was closing in so I thought to stay put in the forest and use the trees for cover.

She flinches a little.

You got *any* idea what's happened?

Haven't a clue, I say. No idea how far this mess has travelled either. No wrist pod on me. Nothing. Electricity's probably down for miles anyway.

She wraps her arms around her waist.

What's a wrist pod?

I stare at her.

I need to get back, she says, blushing. The road's just yonder.

I look where she's looking, slightly left of us, at the fields as tattered as yesterday, though the weather's settled down to a slow burn. Wind's completely gone and there's actually some sky up there - the charcoal dawn now kindling blues tinged with gold. I turn towards the tinge. On a regular day the rising sun would be a regular sun, but this morning, after three days of looking through a tunnel, it's like someone's shining a bright torch in my eyes. Tears start collecting at their edges. This could be my world after all.

Looks like we have ourselves an East too, I tell her.

I step forwards, thinking things through.

Do you know where that bison came from?

She looks at me wary. Steps back.

I was going to ask you the same thing. I thought they didn't exist anymore.

They don't. At least not outside a fence. It must have escaped from the wildlife sanctuary about ten miles west of here.

She nods.

I know of it.

I pull some peaches and mushrooms from my outer pockets. She declines.

You know, it's funny how you look at things, I say, shrugging. When that bison was charging, I thought it was attacking. And maybe it was. But maybe it was running so vigorous because it wasn't caged up anymore. Because it could.

The girl considers me but stays quiet. I finish chewing a mushroom, then turn to go.

I hope this road you're talking about stays a road, I tell her over my shoulder. Though if we run out of pavement, we'll follow the sun as that's where Shackle's sitting and Eashing after that. There'll be help along the way, in any case. No way every farmstead's been bowled over by violence.

She offers a mumble of something and keeps six or so steps behind, Bud trotting back and forth between. After a few yards, we get to the edge of the orchard where low and behold, there's a carved out lane leading all the way to a fork, the left one heading in the general direction of town. Looks like the rain's either drained off the pavement or soaked right in.

Spirits lifting, I glance back at her.

You haven't told me your name.

Eve.

I raise an eyebrow. Can't help but smile a touch.

Now, that's a name for the times.

Her pale cheeks blush pink again.

Yours?

I pause.

Would you laugh if I told you it was Adam?

Yeah, she says, I would.

I turn back round.

Then you can call me Jack.

She says nothing about that, so we keep walking and a quarter mile on, the lane starts turning muddy and wet, as per. Looking yonder, there's a pond overflowing, rippling our way but harmless enough. Bud stops his trotting and treads alongside me like he usually does.

You know something, buddy? Last time I went to Eashing was with Frank. Took me to a piss-up disguised as card playing night. That was two Christmases ago driving in his old clunker. We got there OK but had to tractor it back after Frank's chevy conked out near a mansion of a farmstead a mile or so from the last bar we went to. Convinced me the keys sitting in the front seat was a sign from God. Said the sprawling estate wouldn't miss it much amongst its other fine stock of equipment. When Pa saw us pulling in about four a.m. that morning, Frank was pointing a finger at my head and slurping that it was my doing,

saying he didn't know what had happened due to passing out somewhere between the last bar and my reckless decision.

Well, that was the end of my treks to town. Pa wouldn't hear it anyhow how Frank was as drunk as a wine barrel and that I had to do something to get us back home. Pa even said that as my cousin was old enough to drink, he was old enough to *not* know what he was doing, but that I should have known better. Can you believe that shit? Grounded me for three weeks after that, but not before I had to return the equipment and offer to work for the Mayor for free. Turns out the thin green and yellow tractor stripes painted along the tractor's side were the Mayor's colors. How was I supposed to see colored paint in the dead of night? At least I got the chance to clock up some experience working for someone else. Plus it got me out of the house.

I go quiet because all else around me all of a sudden is. Eve's squelching footsteps have stopped squelching. I spin round.

She's disappeared.

Something's moving exactly where she's supposed to be walking. Something slithering in the sludge, something almost swimming. The quiet now a slip of noise. Sinister, and sliding.

My lungs shudder. A black water viper is winding its way towards us. Saw one just like it last summer while fishing the Wren with Tommy. Black body. Olive head. At far enough range on the other side of the river to be freaked. This one at close enough range to be fucked. I grab the scruff of Bud's neck and heave him into my arms, bolting.

Then I trip up. Bad. Not thirty feet from where I just was. Splat flat on a dry piece of road that I'd give anything to be mud since my skull's ringing and my dog's squirming and I can't tell if it's because the viper's got him or because the world's spinning, or because when I crank myself up and look back, all I see is darkness and shadows and a world spinning darker and I've been here before but always in a boxing ring and always with ropes and referee and whistle telling me when it's all over and done with.

Chapter 9

First thing I smell is lamb with potatoes. My nostrils soak it in.

Dinner's ready.

Betty's calling across two sets of doors, voice cheery and chirpy. I smile wide and lick my lips tasting gravy laden with salt mixed with...blood. My eyes crack open. Next thing I'm smelling is lamb without the potatoes and Betty's voice fading to shreds and dead ahead, standing upright with barely a dent in the metal, letters and numbers winking in silver shards where the sun's hitting the metal and where the grit's not, a road sign:

Eashing 5.5 miles.

First thought: I'm alive.

Second: Bud's alive too. Panting heavy and hovering close.

I raise to my knees, head almost erupting.

Curving over and cradling my forehead in my fingers, I lick my palms where the blood's dry and salty, greedy for the iron. Feeling along my eyebrows, there's a line of sticky etched along my right one. My eyelashes are caked. Skin tender and puffy to the touch.

Just hold on, I'm muttering to Bud, and maybe to myself, since I'm shaking all over and now remembering that snake that was probably a night terror since the sun's now high in a giddy sky making everything bright and daydreamy. I look back and the mud-pit is still pooling, but nothing else is moving and nothing's bulging either.

Eve.

Dead or alive or still dying.

I dig into my pocket.

No gun. No bullets.

My insides revolve.

Rising to my knees, I squint through the glare, straining to see, straining to hear.

Stillness strains back.

Fuck.

I suck my soggy backpack off my rain jacket.

Surprised she didn't take this again, too, I mutter to Bud.

He offers a sloppy wag. Opening the main zip, the jars are gone but everything else is accounted for - underwear, shirt, photo of Pa. The weight of my jackknife is resting in my inner pocket. I take it out in any case and rotate it slow. I need to feel something tangible. Something real.

Doing a stock take of my busted body, my knees are scratched to high heaven, my right ankle's moaning and my left elbow's numb. I replace the jackknife and stumble back down the pavement, groaning, eyes peeled for anything moving, humans included. After circling the mud pit, too weary to panic, I slump down and gulp some water from a pothole and splash it over my face and down my arms. Tastes like old rain, but I'll take it.

The metal sign is blinking at me. Calling me forth. I inhale deep. After ten minutes of gathering steam and sanity, I raise to my feet.

We've got to move on, I tell Bud. If you spot her again, do me a favor and bark for once? Will give me a better chance to save both our butts.

Releasing a handful of mushrooms from the smaller front zip of my backpack, I swallow them whole while Bud pads to the sign. I watch as he gives the rusty pole a sniff before saluting it with a long piss. Then he takes off down the left fork. Beyond the pond, Shackle Hill looms. A gradual incline doming the horizon. I follow my dog, forehead moaning and belly gurgling.

Bud. Wait up, will ya?

He turns round and I catch up and we pad together, getting closer all the time to the hill that's growing bigger all the while. Shackle's higher than Hawk and one I've never had the inclination to ascend. Wind's always blowing this side of the village and I use walking

for walking, not for sightseeing, though at this particular juncture, climbing up and over will cut out a lot of road and a lot of what might not be.

We tread on for a mile or so, the pavement holding up, just. The tar is speckled with potholes, each filled to the brim like Sunday stews. The base of the hill is on our left, yonder. I start treading towards. Bud follows, then leads, then jogs and pricks his ears at me. Then he does something stranger - rushes ahead, stops, then rushes ahead like he's seeing something but not sure he's wanting to see it. Or maybe he's hearing something because he's titling his head before rushing and stopping and circling again.

He's sniffed or spotted or heard the girl. My muscles go on full alert. Instinctively, I crouch, but then I hear it too. A mound of voices. Singing low and mournful and coming from Shackle's crown. I take steps back and spot on the summit a silver windmill leaning slant, the wheel almost snapped off, hanging slack against the main stand, the tip poking a blue-stitched sky. That the windmill's any color other than calamity-brown is something strange in itself. It's glinting in the day's sundrops, stuck next to what looks to be a small barn, nesting. Most of the trees up there are near enough flattened, so the sight is much clearer than usual. I quicken my steps, my boots sucking the ground like they don't want to leave it, then skid to a stop when I see a mother of a moat sweeping around Shackle's base. Looks like most of the rainwater from the road has been dump-trucked right here. I gaze at the toy castle in the distance and for a moment think of Betty's candle, but those aren't rabbits and they aren't sleeping. There's a barn perched there and people in that there barn. From this distance, about four hundred feet shy, the structure looks brown and pudgy. Earth has popped out a brown, pudgy pimple.

For a moment, I've forgotten all about Bud til I glance back and he's as frozen as a popsicle, staring at the water like it's gonna kill him. Before he can flee, I take hold and carry his stiff limbs over the five foot length of three foot deep water.

Dumping him on the other side of the moat, he springs to life, shaking and sniffing and climbing up towards the noise. The singing's more distinct now. Women's voices and men's voices. Not many, but enough to keep me climbing and the more we do the more I'm seeing life come back to life. Grass is visible though it's more or less pulped green slime. Bud pauses to chew on a patch of longer blades.

You always puke that stuff up, I warn him.

He goes on chewing and I go on climbing, adrenaline and wind pumping equal measure. We're almost at the summit and the trees are thinning and making the path easier to follow, and I should be ecstatic at hearing other folks alive, and surely food rations will be present upon arrival, but I'm slowing down. I'm a magnet push-pulling towards another magnet. Attracting, repelling. Repelling, attracting. I shudder at what's getting closer. What I'm getting closer to. Feels like a pulsing shadow, but I can't help stepping towards that pulse.

That following feeling? I figured it was all gone after I met Eve. Now it's all gone and sucked itself into a tiny drop filling up the core of me and any second spilling over and drowning me in its flood. I topple over just with the thought. My hands clasp my knees. My knees clasp the earth. My lips and nose clog with spit, then a lick from Bud's drippy tongue sputters me out of my watery grave and back into the other one.

Blarhh.

I wipe my mouth and raise my head to a wagging tail and another tongue-swipe along my chin.

Quit, alright?

I breathe deep and gather enough strength to stand.

I've had panic attacks before but that there was something else. I hold my belly with my arms. The pulsing yonder is beating right through me. Drumming me forward. It's the singing that's driving me nuts, my body its tuning fork. The hymns are bouncing off the trees. The core of me is throbbing and my nerves are twisting and the hymning's doing my head in. I look at Bud, then ask the question,

How about we just swivel up right here and make like Ma's garden snails and curl up in our shells and cosy down with the rest of the soaking world?

But my dog's smiling and wagging like there's nothing's wrong with the situation.

You don't know what we're up against here, do you, buddy? I ask him, trying again.

But my dog's smiling and wagging like there's nothing wrong with *me*.

Fine, I tell him. Have it your way.

I take a couple more breaths and we start zig-zagging over the fallen trees looking for clearer ground. The top of the hill's starting to look like a monk's head. Bald on top with a blunt rim of forest running round its perimeter. The voices are rippling across the grass, ruffling the hairs on my skin. My muscles are vibrating and my chest is pounding. No

turning back now. A hundred yards to go and the summit is leveling out to the monk's crown now the size of a football pitch, the barn at its center. Rusty wooden slats smudged with damp. Cement bubble-gummed between. Entrance a wooden rib arching over a door ajar. Dark wood. Walnut. Windows dotted along the side walls, small and square and open, reflecting blue and pink and orange.

Louder now, that hymning. Can't quite make out the words but I never listened much anyway.

Aching to arrive. Despising the ache.

Eighty yards. Heart pumping in my ribs.

Fifty yards. In my toes.

Twenty. My hands.

Could throw a football clear off this summit with the thump in my hands. Then the singing halts, my heart along with it. My ears strain against the quiet until a voice drones forth from deep within the church's bowels. A preacher's voice. Low and lowing.

Oh Father, in you we trust. For whatever has come to bear, whatever we have been delivered, we trust in you Oh Lord to provide shelter, nurture, and provide, and if in the days ahead we find no solace amongst ourselves, we find solace in you, Oh Lord, for whatever you have delivered. For you have your ways of delivering that only you understand.

Quiet, again. I pull myself back from rushing into the hushed space, say *shhhtt* to Bud to hold him steady but of course he doesn't, just pads right up to the entrance like he's dressed in his Sunday best. I watch the tip of his nose, then tail vanish behind the gap. A second later and I'm pressing the door open, my eyes adjusting to the dim, my mouth panting from the hike.

A few gasps as I bring in the light. A few more when they see what the light's brought in. Huge pulping pause when heads turn back to the preacher who's standing at a makeshift haystack-on-end pulpit holding his Bible like a home cooked pie staring straight at me. He's tall and slim and leathery. I glance around the small spread of people perched on a U-bend of wooden benches. The barn looks like any barn, just with more people and less animals - an upside down Noah's Ark with its ribbed-hulled ceiling and flat-decked roof. I nod at the folk, shy, then spot Bud wagging at each one of them like a goddamn welcome wagon.

Preacher's still staring.

I open my mouth to say something but he opens his first and says,
Greetings, son. Take a seat.

Chapter 10

The instruction's so simple and direct, I can't help but do as he says, so I walk a few steps, relieved to be received, and sit down on an unused bench behind everyone else. About a dozen folk in all. No kids. No pets. Looks like they've met a shower in the last day or so, though the general appearance reeks of survival mode: worn clothes, shoes, expressions.

The preacher clears his throat and grips his pie as if to start up again but then a shriek. A woman leaps up as Bud pukes near her feet. More or less pulped green slime. A few grimaces from the other folk while she staggers to the other end of the bench, snapping her head in my direction, face plump and pink as a tomato, eyeglasses tilted. Scowls like I've just brought the garbage in. I give her a small shrug, tell Bud to come. He skittles over but lowers to the floor, slurping water from a crease in the stone floor, then pawing off the gunk glued to his whiskers. The woman realigns her glasses, walks over, peers at the gash along my forehead,

You alright, boy? Looks like you've been in a brawl, besides.

Nothing more than usual, I blurt into the echo of space.

A burning hush meets my burning blush as I look from the woman to the preacher to the rest of the congregation, all staring, friendly enough.

Listen, I start. If anyone's got some information as to what's just happened? Me and my dog have been camping out day and night since mayhem hit. We're heading to town. Had to leave home. It was...broken up real bad and -

A bit more about what's going on?

The tomato lady cuts in like I've stated the obvious.

The End of the World is what, and we're waiting for Jesus to save us.

She brushes her lashes up and down my chimney-sweep self.

But you sure ain't Jesus.

A chuckle spreads through the stable. The woman grins and holds out her hand.

I'm Thelma, she says. And this is my barn. The horses have fled but we've still got two milking cows, a sheep, chickens. We'll get you a wash cloth and a bandage for that cut. Sally, grab a few from the rack, will you?

Thelma gives me another once over.

You got any fresh clothes in that backpack?

I nod while the preacher strides towards.

The sermon can wait, he says loud. Let's greet this brother as one of our own and see if we can't fill this here barn with some further good will.

A wave of nods around the room. He purses his lips.

Samuel. Nice to meet you.

I stick to Jack and he shakes my hand tight, then pats Bud's head and leans a little closer. The man smells of musty wood and old candles.

You must be hungry, son. Let's get you something to eat.

We shuffle round the benches, folk murmuring in our wake. A gangly woman in pigtails and patched shirt interrupts our flow and hands me a damp cloth, plus a tin cup full of water. She motions to my head. The wound's dry, but I dab my skin with the cloth just the same, take huge gulps from the cup. Then the woman raises a thinner piece of dry cloth and leans forward to wrap it around my crown but I tell her I'm good.

We have some large tubs and water jugs out back, she says. When you want, you can fill one and clean yourself up.

I nod thanks and follow Samuel towards the back of the barn to a latch door on the left. There's a scuffling of footsteps behind us. The heavier footsteps are the tomato lady's,

following at a close distance. The sheep bleats as we pass. Samuel turns the handle and Bud skids past to a scullery-type room. Small and basic and dark and musty.

We're having chicken in half an hour or so, on the fire, but for now this is what we got.

He walks over to the wooden countertop and lifts an urn and pours some milk into a wooden mug. Then he pops open a treasure chest housing a key in its lock. Drops a handful of wafers into my palms.

I try looking like I hadn't retched them yesterday and place them on my tongue one at a time. Bud's at my feet drooling like a waterfall so I throw him a couple, then gulp the milk and ask for a top up for Bud. The preacher obliges. He sure is tall. And thin as these wafers. Wouldn't last long in a fight but at least he'd see the man coming. I glance at the door which is swaying by a breeze of people flocked behind it.

I keep my voice dim.

That lady saying it's the End of the World. She's kidding, right?

Samuel narrows his eyes at me which I'm not sure is a good sign or a bad sign.

How did you find us, son?

I spotted the barn from the road. The fork leading from the orchard? All those trees blown aside like that. Anyways, we were making our way east towards town when I heard the singing. Folk have been few and far between since all that madness with the earthquake and such. Was good to hear people's voices again.

You haven't much of a clue the extent of what's happened, have you? Suppose you didn't look down on your way up.

The man's words sound more like statements than questions. I follow his gaze out the nearest window, a smaller square even than Bill and Betty's bathroom porthole. Clouds are gathering. Wind also.

Too busy putting one foot in front of the other, I tell him. Surely this natural disaster's been a local thing? Glad to have found you folk along the way, in any case. Finding food and cover's been such a bitch. Sorry, Father. Anyhow, Bud and I would appreciate some shelter for the night, then we'll be on our way come morning. Town wouldn't have been hit that bad, surely.

Samuel turns to me, curious.

Now, why would you think such a thing?

I stare at him.

About the disaster being a local affair?

No, about you thinking it's been a natural one.

I pause, wondering how to put it.

Because something this ugly would only happen to a shit-small - sorry, Father - outpost like Overstraddle and surrounds. Weather's always doing funny stuff in this valley. Sounds crazy I know, and I suppose the thought's been keeping my feet moving, but no doubt what's beyond this valley's held up better. Even if that earthquake or whatever the heck it was travelled that far across, surely...I trail off.

Samuel's staring at me, squinting as though there's grit in his eyes. Then he closes his eyelids and starts twining his fingers around a large wooden cross hanging on some string around his neck. I glance out the window again.

You saying all this is a supernatural occurrence? I ask him.

His eyes snap open.

How about we take a trip up the windmill, he says somber. Then you can see the extent of the situation for yourself. You got enough energy for that?

I nod and he waves to the door and leads me out the back of the barn, past Thelma and a couple others looking on curious, towards the windmill posted on the north side. Bud at my heels, I tell him to sit still while the man takes off his robe and starts climbing the iron steps. He's wearing blue jeans and a black T-shirt. Some ancient rock group printed on the front. I strip my backpack and place it by Bud.

Watch the third step, Samuel calls over his shoulder. It's loose.

I ain't used to heights but I have to see for myself. I follow behind, hands and boots gripping the iron bars, Samuel arriving at the top in no time, sending a pigeon flapping up and back on itself straight past my neck. A soft cooing from somewhere close and another pigeon's nesting in one of the blades curving towards the mid section.

I get to the top and make a point of not looking down. Feel woozy just thinking about it. Quick glance at the preacher and he's watching the sweat dripping from my chin. I wipe it away and take a deep breath and open my eyes and my teeth almost fall out. Can see Eashing as well as the lake framing it in the furthest distance. Can see lots of things. Problem is, every thing is pretty much the same thing. The buildings are a bunch of matchsticks, the hovering lake more a cleft that's blending into a town afloat. There's boats

or cars looking like boats or cars, but nothing's sailing or driving as much as drowning. Tipping, tossing, operating any which way other than how they're supposed to. And no humans. Not a single person or animal in sight. I hang my head, sighing heavy at what's below as well as what's staring me right in the face.

Yeah, well, we don't know what's past all this though, do we?

I sound as convinced as a fish looking for water on a chopping board. And something's gasping inside, alright. It's one thing losing home and gaining hope. It's another watching that hope sweep clear away.

Samuel considers me. Makes his voice somber again.

I'm afraid we do, son. God has spoken and spoken true. The world has ended and we must wait for His good grace for it to begin again.

He dips his head, brings his palms together, then looks up at me under a fringe of black. I squint at him. Something about his clothes and manner ain't sitting right.

I cock my head.

You even a Preacher?

He smirks.

I preach, don't I?

We lock eyes.

What's going on...*Father*? I need some answers real soon about what's happening. I need to know if...if there's a chance of having a life out there.

Feel so awkward saying it, I can't meet his gaze. Instead, I look up. The clouds are still gathering, stitching white with gray.

Samuel strokes his jaw, then stretches his arms.

You know it's a good thing, what you're asking. It's a good thing. Better you keep questioning. Cause once you got no more questions then you got all the answers, and if you think you got all the answers then you're missing the biggest question of all.

I raise my eyebrows.

And what question's that?

Whichever one comes next.

Samuel's lips curve and his fingers tuck underneath his sleeve, wriggling upwards. Eyes clamped on me, he draws a cigarette and lighter. Spurs the wheel and a little bonfire sparks. He takes deep drags. After a minute, he offers the butt's burning entrails. I decline.

Call it a flood or The Flood, he continues, but the water keeps rising and it's tidal-waving everything in sight. Sooner or later the waves might even rise up this here hill. And we gotta be ready. Seems like something wants to wipe us all out and hell, it may be Mother Nature doing the overtaking, but the congregation believe it's something a little bigger than that and they need to keep believing it.

I narrow my eyes.

How come?

The man rubs his hands like they're cold.

See this is the thing. Belief won't get you far. No. You gotta know something to know it. Belief will get you to the gutter and stuck in it. Having an opinion on things ain't nothing but thoughts swimming around each other sucking on each other's scales. There ain't nowhere or nothing beyond those scales. No where to surface. Only swimming and circling til you don't know if you're coming or going. A big fucking ocean of unknowing. Belief son, is one shot blind of ignorant. One shot closer to looking up your own butthole.

He tips his head to mine and places a finger to his lips.

But these folk? They still gotta believe cause they've always done so and it makes them safe. Keeps them from asking questions. You should have seen these people when the shit hit. You'd think they'd have been the calmest of the lot, but no. Most everyone was 'Hell Marys,' not 'Hail Marys' and well, I had to do something. Had to ease their minds and remind them of what they'd always believed - that this is God's doing, that the End of the World has come. That the Devil's time is up, not him *showing* up. Had to do that or else they would have wiped each other out the day they almost were. Fear and panic are beasts, sometimes even more so than seeing blind.

Me? I stopped sucking a long time ago. Pa had been the preacher in this here village for years. Anyhow, he was resting in the clergy house when it all went down. Old man Proctor sick in bed and all that. Died before it struck. At least praying got him that much. I was at the Chapel next door baby-sitting, and I had to take over. Never wanted to, I can assure you. But these people were looking to me for guidance as though it was in my genes or something. Do you know half of them didn't even make it to the Chapel in the first place due to the drippy weather? And most who did are near enough to occupying their grave allocations already. Still, someone's got to take charge. Someone's gotta keep doing something other than just believing. That's real surviving.

I rake my fingers through my fringe.

You don't have a clue what's going on either, I tell him.

He smiles.

Listen, son. My gut says it's the weather, and my gut's usually right. Storms and quakes hitting different areas. Maybe different continents. But nothing apocalyptic. There's been no satellite contact or anything letting us know for sure, so I've taken it as my responsibility to hold fort. For now. At least until emergency services come our way. The flooding's gotta stop at some point.

He follows my gaze to his bare wrists.

We don't use wrist pods in these parts. God's the only energy source we need, got me?

He winks, then sniffs the air.

Good thing Thelma has been able to house this many, though survivors have been few since that first day. No one except you has come for days.

The man glances over my shoulder, then slumps down on the wooden ledge near the motor and lights another cigarette.

I just hope that woman keeps her head on. Folk are starting to get nervy and she's been the worst of the lot. You say you've travelled from Overstraddle?

I look west where he's looking. My village is lying in tatters. Shreds more like. The crater, a deep cut in the earth's skin, stretching post to post to Cattle Village. The farmlands, blackened birthmarks. River Wren, a wide open wound still oozing brown. I almost don't hear what the preacher says next, something about a girl missing, but when it filters through, my muscles curl.

A girl, you say?

He nods.

Fifteen, blonde, full of surprises. Eve is always going off into the woods gathering herbs and such. Has a way with plants, animals, all things nature. Fairy-type soul. Anyways, she went walking the day of the cataclysm. I thought maybe you'd come across her. She was heading your way. Anyhow.

What do I mention first? The stalking, knife, or the gun?

I shake my head blank and he hangs his. I try sounding neutral.

She your daughter or something?

Sister. Adopted, he says. Pa found her in the neighboring orchard on one of his morning walks before sermon. Someone had left her in a grandmother of an apple tree. Eve was three, maybe four months old. No note, nothing. Pretty basket, though.

An apple tree?

Yeah. Snuggled tight in the hollow.

I swallow hard.

Aunt Bethany took care of her, mostly, until Bethany got married and had kids of her own. Pa was getting too old and I was getting too old to pay much attention. Was about Eve's age now, actually, when we took her on.

He shakes his head.

I told Eve she'd get into trouble one day, always going into those woods alone. And now look. She's walked straight into the wild gone more so.

Coils of cigarette smoke snake past my neck, spiraling towards the nesting pigeon below. I chance a glance down and check on Bud. He's sleeping sound.

Did you know the daily nourishment for pigeons is seeds, grains, berries, that sort of thing? Samuel says. Only wild pigeons will sometimes eat snails and worms and such. Now, that's a question for you. How does this little creature adapt from living in a civilized world to a savage one overnight? Where's he gonna find fresh grains? Where's he gonna get his berries?

I stare at him. Samuel takes a last inhale. He stubs it on the stone wall and flings the butt past my shoulders where it arrows over the mill, joining the others.

It ain't littering if you've got an ashtray, he says, shrugging.

I glance at the barn.

The congregation. Have you mentioned anything about emergency services coming?

He grimaces.

Wouldn't want to get their hopes up just yet. Hope dropped is worse than any raised. At least their kind. Hope ain't a thing sitting on a shelf waiting to be dusted. It's being able to fly off that shelf knowing it's got wings and trusting they'll fly to something better. Anyway, whenever rescue happens, these folk can start poking around someone else's pulpit.

He sighs and motions to the step and I descend first, reaching the windmill's base wiped and daunted. Then I spot smoke of a different sort hurling upwards on the other side

of the barn. Fumes laced with chicken fat. Bud's woken up and already turning the corner, nose leading the way. I tug on my backpack.

We got berries for now, I mumble.

Samuel pulls his arms through the sleeves of his robe, the cuffs landing at his elbows, the bottom hem finishing at his knees.

For now we got berries, he repeats.

And then I follow him to the other side.

Chapter 11

Samuel shoots past me. Bud also, down the tip of the hill where the congregation is doing just that - congregating around someone who I can't see but who I know it must be. Bud knows, too. Finds his way easy through the maze of legs, parting the crowd, and I'm staring at a girl with angel hair and demon eyes who's staring at me as she would death, as she would a nightmare come round again.

We lock eyes. We blink away. The crowd doesn't notice. Bud pads back and I pat him quiet. A buzzing of chatter and people swirling round, a horse blanket thrown around Eve's shoulders. Her scarf is missing. Samuel places his hands on her elbows, steadying. Thelma gets close and gasps. She calls for cloths, then whiskey.

I step closer and there's a bloom of pink flowering on Eve's forearm, near her wrist. Samuel rolls up the fabric of her shirt and she winces. The flesh is marked by a double rainbow of red dots.

If she was pale looking before, now she's completely washed out, drained of all color except the patterning on her skin. Samuel guides her through the entrance of the barn, talking low in her ear. A few folk are still gathering around the leftovers at the fire, but most follow inside. Samuel tries lowering the girl on the bed of hay but she resists and sits down instead, tucking her head in the crook of his bony shoulder.

She's breathing heavy and her knees are touching. Her arms go to her belly, swaddling. Thelma bends over and points in a hurry around the barn like she's showing it

to the girl for the first time. Eve sweeps her eyes past me. I've taken position two stalls down, hiding next to the pen housing the sheep, though Bud's taken center stage, wagging docile near her feet. I wonder if I should ask for my gun now, or wait til she offers it back. Then I remember what I told Samuel. More, what I hadn't told him. I say nothing, and stay put.

A petite woman, almost the smallness of Eve, saddles up and hands Thelma a whiskey bottle. Thelma grabs it, opens the cap, takes a big swig.

Thanks, Joan, she says, then scours Eve's arm.

Samuel, that there's a snake bite. Look at the puncture marks.

A few gasps from the crowd as Samuel leans in and Eve nods, tears drawing lines down her smudged cheeks. I swallow tight. Eve mumbles something and Thelma shakes her head.

Looks venomous to me, the woman says. Here.

She offers the whiskey bottle but Eve turns her chin.

You been conscious this whole time? Thelma asks.

Eve nods.

Breathing OK?

Eve nods again.

Hmmm. Still. We need something small that's sharp enough to cut with. Anyone got something sharp?

I hold my tongue. Eve glances sideways. We lock eyes again. I may be mistaken, but I think her head's shaking at me real slow.

Let's not do anything rash, Samuel says. She's doing alright.

Look at her, Samuel. She's pale as milk. When did you get bitten, girl?

This morning, Eve croaks. On my way past the orchard.

Thelma looks up to the ceiling, hands on her hips.

Still, she says. You should lie down so the wound's below your heart. Uncle Joe told me all about snake bites and even if it's a dry bite, that's what you should do. Reactions can happen any time.

Thelma's face scrunches and her hand clamps her mouth as though something's just come to her.

This is a sign that the Devil's at work, is what this is. And with those ominous clouds gathering outside again? Oh, Eve.

The woman falls to her knees.

Jesus, save us now, she moans, dipping her head. This child is back in our fold but with a sign that all's not well. All's not well!

Samuel purses his lips. Exhales slow.

Now's not the time for jumping to conclusions, Thelma. We have to trust in God's plan and we have to think practical, too. Eve's doing alright.

As he says it, Joan returns with a mug of milk and few strips of chicken. Eve ignores the chicken and reaches for the milk and swallows quick. Thelma stands up, her face turning a riper shade of tomato.

I'm one of the most practical people around. You know that. And that means doing something. We need to cut that poison out before it infects the rest of -

Enough! Samuel releases Eve and stands up and over the woman. We've all been seeing things a little skew. Situation's tense enough under the current circumstances not to -

It's been four days, preacher. Four days and patience is running thin.

Samuel stays mute and Thelma scowls, then looks at Eve, lips drawing tight.

Fine, she says. Have it your way. She's in your hands now. And they better pray hard.

She twists herself from his grip and stomps towards the front of the barn, motioning for the crowd to follow.

All's quiet. The congregation hovers, expressions bordering between antsy and alarm. A minute more and they disperse in threads, leaving me and Bud in plain sight.

I scan the barn quick. The closest exit is the one Thelma and the others have just departed from. If I go out that door, it will seem I've joined ship, which feels more awkward than staying where I am. Eve's turned her gaze towards the back of the stall anyhow, knees in fetus position, fingers kneading the horse blanket.

The clergy house was almost swept away, she says hush. The Chapel...

Samuel pats her hair.

We climbed up as soon as the scullery began flooding. Pa had passed on about an hour before. There was no time to bury him. No time to even leave you a note. How'd you manage to stay safe?

Eve pins her gaze on the wall.

I found shelter. Terrain got a bit easier the closer I travelled, but then the snake bit me. A viper, maybe, but I don't think the puncture went deep. Had to rest some, is all.

Eve pulls her wrist up to view, gazes at the wound.

Don't mind Thelma, alright? Samuel says. Everyone's a little on edge just now. Just stay close.

She looks at him. Huffs.

Where's there to go?

Eve raises the mug to her lips and Bud shuffles over, asking please with a paw on her knee. She gives him a small pat.

Who's this?

My throat clinches. Samuel glances over his shoulder.

Dog arrived with this fellow earlier. Jack, do you mind giving us some space here?

Sure, I say, neutral as possible. Come on, Bud.

I step closer and grab my dog by the neck.

Come on, buddy. Let's go wash up.

Eve's avoiding eye contact, and seeing nothing weighting her pockets, I walk away. I'm almost at the door when I hear her voice raising a little louder than it needs to.

Everyone I came across was dead, Samuel. Either dead, or dying in front of my eyes.

Chapter 12

Clouds breaking. Rain. Thunder. Ripping through the sky. Night's rolling in, full of thorns and lashings, and we're all crouching in the barn that's creaking like a boat, all the animals crouching, too. Samuel goes to the window, rain beating like black wasps, stinging the glass.

Won't be long now, he says confident. Storm's breaking just yonder.

Thelma stomps up and shuffles to his side and pushes her way in, peers out the window, then stares at him cold.

That's only the full moon doing funny tricks with the light, she says. That's no breaking nothing.

Then she walks over to Joan, wraps her arms around her shoulders and guides her back to their stall. The others are either dozing or wrapping their knees in their arms or bringing their fingers to prayer formation. Eve's sleeping sound and Bud also.

I get up, chest tight.

Samuel? Can I have a word?

He's still standing by the window and I don't think he's heard me through the din. A thousand stings are attacking the pane, then a diving whoosh followed by a loud thud. Samuel and I lean our heads on the glass and five feet yonder on the belted ground is a pigeon lying on its side - neck slack, eyes cloudy, wings twitching. Once. Twice. Then nothing. We exchange glances.

Wonder when it's going to stop, I ask him.

The storm?

I pause.

Yeah.

Someone taps me on the shoulder and I almost jab her with my elbow. It's Joan, standing real close. So close I can see her upper lip shaking.

You remind me of my own son, Matthew. Just shy of thirteen, he was. Tried saving me from the surging at Shackle's base, but that current got hold of him and took him clear away from...she trails off, sucks in her breath.

Your family, she says next. You were with them when it happened?

I stare at the ground.

Yeah.

I'm so sorry, she says. Must have been awful.

The woman takes a tissue from her pocket and makes like she's going to hand it over but raises it to her temple instead.

Just awful, she says.

How did you manage to survive, son?

A voice from the nearest corner. Older voice. I turn round to a sagging man rising from a bench. Wisps of hair matted to his temples. Teacher tone. Kind but firm.

I shrug.

Guess surviving is what I do best.

He gawks at me, then sits back down.

A soft sweeping behind. The back door swings open, then bangs shut. Opens again like someone's exhaling but not quite since there's no one on the other side doing the breathing. It slams again. All eyes on the door and a mad gasp from Thelma as it keeps swinging and slamming. Faster. Louder. I fight an urge to bolt through that gap and escape the barn's tight fit of shadows.

Bud does the bolting for me. Don't know what's come over him but he bursts through and starts barking. That never happens. I fling myself out the door, punching it open as it swings back, and shout for him. At first, I can't see his shape for the rain, but then he circles towards and lifts his muzzle like he's drinking the drops. I'm soaked through already, arms arching over my head, peering.

What, Bud?

Then I hear it. Impossible in this weather, but there it is: an airplane - single-seater, small and swerving, then circling up.

Chapter 13

I'm swinging my arms, Bud's going ballistic, and folk start spilling out of the barn with the chickens running amok, tripping them up. A crash and toppling from behind and I move out the way just in time before the cows and sheep avalanche. Everyone's ducking, then screaming as the airplane teeters and nosedives into the middle of the barn. The blades whip the roof and the cockpit sinks out of sight, bellows of fire licking the wings sticking out and the tail sticking up.

Most of the folk are still inside.

A stench of melting metal and swollen flames and I spot Bud flat on the ground, paws spread, crouching so low he looks like he's going to pounce, but then I realize he's petrified, glued to the spot. I sprint over and lift him in my arms, people scurrying, animals fleeing, the barn alight and burning bright.

Squinting through the toxic smoke, I see Samuel staggering across the threshold, Eve hanging limp in his arms. He halts just short of the downpour and leans unstable against the wall. His robe is wrapped around Eve's torso like a body bag. Claspings Bud, I tread over, feeling the heat of the fire competing with the cold of the rain - a sizzling sweat.

Take her, he gasps. And take it out.

I stare at him, stumped. He lifts the robe and exposes a forearm hot red and swollen angry. He lets the fabric fall over the snake bite, his chest falling forwards, too. I drop Bud at the same time as I catch Eve, at the same time as Samuel lurches to his knees, one arm

steadying his weight on the grass, the other at his back, fingers grabbing his T-shirt for the piece of shrapnel stuck near his spine. Daggers also piercing his shoulders and bare neck and scarlet drops dripping from his lips.

No.

I swing round. Everyone's dealing with their own personal disasters - shouting for help, sprinting to help, sobbing.

Samuel.

He holds up his hand.

Take. Her, he gasps, and exhales to the ground.

I spin round, looking for an exit. Through the raining smoke, side-stepping the falling debris, shouting for Bud to follow, I stumble past the west wall where the nose of the cockpit is crushed beyond belief. A cracked helmet is visible. The rest of the body not. Gazing up at the tail, glistening white in the licking flames, heat blasting my face, I'm looking for emergency colors and I don't see emergency colors. I see thin green and yellow tractor-type stripes. My heart spasms. This guy wasn't trying to get in. He was trying to get out.

The Silo.

Eve's eyes are fluttering at me. The black fabric raises a touch. She turns her face and blinks.

Silo.

In the charcoal sky is a darker smudge, about forty yards down slope. Small as a thumbnail. I carry us towards, Bud a magnet behind. Arriving on its stone doorstep, I glance at the chaos behind - the fire now roaring and rippling across the length of the barn, specks of people flickering about. I squeeze the rain from my eyes and launch us in, the door giving way to a vault, domed and disused, tin-can walls dented and shot with holes. I lower Eve on the stone slabs, dust flouring up. The space has hardly any light left, save shafts of sliver piercing the holes. The shafts are so sharp, for a second, I'm convinced some alien ship has landed on the summit, about to take us all. Then I remember the harvest moon that was cresting just before the deluge.

Then, another apparition. A black ghost hanging from a nail on the back of the door, its flesh almost touching mine. I leap over Eve and almost slam Bud against the wall, cursing from here to Kingdom come.

Bud cowering and me barely breathing, my eyes adjust to a priest's robe dangling and thudding the door in smaller increments with a lump in its front pocket. Heart still hopping, I step round the girl and glide my fingers into the fold, past the cold metal of my gun, to the knife. I pull it free. Then I take the dry robe off the nail, replace it with the wet one covering Eve's body and slice a long bandage from the one of its sleeves, then lower to my knees and raise her wrist. She's out for the count, which is a good thing.

Bud, come.

Can't think of anything else to use as an antiseptic.

Bud, lick.

Then I bat him away quick. What was I thinking? My dog's about to ingest poison, too.

Sorry, buddy. Got to concentrate here.

The blade's a few inches from her skin, ready to cut, though I haven't a clue how deep to go and if it's going to do any good whatsoever because the venom would have travelled everywhere by now and do I even use a tourniquet and anyhow Eve's opening her eyes and staring at me, terrified.

I lower the knife.

I'm only helping, I tell her. The snake bite. It's swelling up bad.

She yanks her arm away from my grip and slides up against the wall, huddling.

The barn is burning up, and so are you. Samuel told me to cut the venom out.

Where is he? She rasps.

She's sweating, hair dripping. The rain's beating sharp, making the shafts of moonlight twitch. Tears are streaming down her face. She lowers her head to her knees, sobbing like a child.

He's dead, isn't he?

Bud pads over and places his head near her feet.

I say it soft.

We need to cut the venom out.

Leave me alone.

Her shoulders are heaving and she's lifting her head and staring at me. I lean closer.

I'm not gonna do that.

I lean closer still, but she pins her back against the wall.

Leave me alone!

Sobs tremble the air. Then everything goes motionless like a clock tripping up time. Eve starts collapsing and I steady her before she thumps head first to the floor. Her eyes are open but swimming at the light twitching.

The stars, she slurs. So many.

She turns her gaze to mine. Her paleness is muted against the tin. Her hazel eyes darker and wider and staring like an owl's. Then she blinks like one. A slow draw of a blink. A shushing blink. A creature of the night, of all things seen and seeing.

You know what I've liked most about everything shutting off?

I frown. Hold her tight.

The dark. The dark that comes with the night. Seeing nothing but what's been here all along. What always will be.

I look at her dumb.

Stars, she presses. Stars, and rain, and silence.

Then she closes her eyelids and goes limp and I'm holding her weight on my lap, alarm cutting right through. If she was burning before, now she's on fire. Placing her real gentle on the ground, I change out of my drenched clothes as quick as possible and take the dry robe off her body and throw it over my own so that she can cool and I can warm.

I'm breathing rapid. Breathing for us both.

I lean my back against the tin, trying my best to keep calm. Minutes go by - ten, a hundred - when the rain all a sudden stops. I stand up slow, walk the few steps, open the door. Then I breathe in the night air and gaze at the sky turning dark turning light with one star, then a sprinkling, then an explosion. The Sky Station gleams. Slumping to the ground, exhausted, I imagine lonely angels. Though the world is broken, I imagine lonely angels sending me off to a lonelier sleep, a sleep so deep it will wake me up in another place on another planet in another sky screaming the same beauty as this one.

*

Dawn's breaking. I'm walking from the shed towards to my bedroom. When I open my door, Pa's sitting on my chair with his head in his hands. He doesn't look up.

Come here, he says.

His fingers are threading his hair.

I do as he says. He's got his pyjamas on. The black ones. Black slippers. A thief in the night, only it's the beginning of a new day.

Come here.

More threading.

The bed's pinned up against the wall, exposing porno mags and Ma's hand-gun lodged between the planks. The desk lamp is lying on the floor, the lampshade hanging from its skeleton rim and the dislodged lightbulb cracked open and leaking rust on the cream carpet.

The curtains are pulled a little open, a dim light misting the room, misting his bald spot smudged with red like a stain. His fingers are making a web over it.

I swallow hard. I've walked from one crime scene into another and I haven't a clue what I'll be charged with next: the magazine with the boys or the magazine with the girls or the gun. My eyes skim over the magazines and the gun and land on the lightbulb.

I'm sorry I hit you, I say. I wasn't thinking clear. My head. All that hymning and chanting. All that listening. Look, Pa. I'll never ditch church again. OK? Pa?

Come here.

I walk over and he raises his head and reaches out. I hold out my good hand. He doesn't shake it. I hold out my bad hand and he wraps his fingers around Ma's kerchief. It's the first time he's ever held something of me. He burrows his eyes into mine. He presses my wrist. Then he points to the gun.

You know what to do, he says, and leaves the bedroom without another word.

Bud is sitting just outside the door, looking at me weird.

Git, I tell him and he whines a little.

Git, I tell him and I walk over and close the door on him.

Then I walk towards my upturned bed for Ma's gun when my foot lands on something sharp. A shard of lightbulb is digging at my heel. I pluck it out, drops of liquid falling. Then I lower to my knees and grab the lightbulb and break it further into yin and yang halves. Without another thought, on autopilot, I lay back and slice my left wrist and pink flows and pain sprinkles. Then I slice my right wrist with wobbly fingers.

After the shock of the slicing, a numbness grows and I wonder at that - how quickly life can spill out and blank you out. How merciful the body can be when you want done with it. And it's shutting down quick. The dizziness in my head. The pumping of my heart.

Then more faint, like an bygone watch ticking down its battery. And I wonder at that too - how the heart can bleed externally when you have little care or consciousness anymore to give a shit about the stains.

And then he finds me, just before I melt away. Probably smelt the blood. As it blends with the rust of the lightbulb and the cream of the carpet, as my body and heart lay open and pulsing on the floor, the last thing I see is my dog padding over, sniffing the whole of me before lying near my chest. Bud has found me, again, so I pull him close and spoon his body.

A warm water bottle for the cold as ice night.

Chapter 14

Pain's compressing my muscles, stop and start spasms tweaking round sharp corners. I jerk upright and snap my eyes open and stare at my wrists. They're as smooth as marble, though pricking hot. Worry fires in me, despite. My nightmares are starting to create things that didn't happen. Rubbing my eyes and leaning my head between the indents in the tin, I'm staring at nothing, thinking of everything.

Eve's fever has broken and she's still breathing and it's still full-moon dark. I check her wrist as I've been doing all night, in and out of ragged, jagged sleep. I think the swelling's gone down, but I can't be certain. Bud's sleeping calm near my legs. Rotating my shoulders, I'm about to doze off again when I hear a polite knocking on the door ajar.

Matthew? Is that you?

Joan's gawking at me.

It's Jack, I tell her cautious. I'm Jack.

Oh, she says. Well, most folk are dead. Thelma's praying. That fire...she stops talking and stares at me like she can't push out any more words.

I get up and place my hand on her shoulder and peer over her head towards the barn. The sight is humps and holes. The smell, cindery sharp and smokey metal.

But I've come to tell you that we're doing OK and Jesus is on his way, she says, eyes brightening. That's why I've come. To tell you that Jesus is on his way.

Then she turns on her heels, one shoe on, the other missing, teetering back over the small rise, back towards an outpost already turned relic.

I rub my forehead then sink down, aching, on the dust-ridden floor which sparks a round of coughing. My nose is clogged and my chest is racking and I feel like I always feel when I'm getting sick. Sick.

A murmur beside me. Eve's moving.

Hey.

I reach out and check her pulse and it's stopped racing. Her eyelids flick open.

Jack?

I'm right here. You OK?

I'm starving, she moans.

I smile wide.

Good, I tell her. Everything's back to normal.

Grabbing Samuel's robe from the nail, I swing it around her shoulders. It's still damp but not as drenched as her clothes.

Change into this. It's summer and all, but you should wrap up.

I sit her up slow and she nods thanks. Then I turn away, sneezing loud into the black depths of the sleeve fold.

I'm going back to the barn. Need to check the extent of the damage and find us some food. Won't be long.

I step towards the door, Bud already past me and slurping rainwater from a tipped pail. East is starting to wake up - a wash of honey, streaking wide. I stretch and spot another pail around the curve of the silo, this one upright and filled to the brim. I ask if she's done changing, and then heave the water into the small circle of space.

Here, you go. Enough to drink and wash with, too.

Eve wipes her mop of hair from her brow. Her forearm's still red.

You sure you're OK?

She shrugs.

Jack?

Yeah?

Thanks.

Sure.

I mean it.

Sure.

We exchange glances.

Just be here when I get back, I say, and then I walk away.

Chapter 15

I almost laugh out loud, the visual's so absurd. Thelma's crouched beside the windmill, milking a cow. An empty ice cream tub is on the ground and she's hunched right over it, arms piston-pumping the teats, getting squirts, and when I walk closer and around, her red cheeks are streaked with soot, both eyeglass lenses splintered, pinafore a charred piece of cloth.

Thelma?

I step closer.

Thelma?

I told you the Devil was doing tricks, she spits. I knew it. But you wouldn't listen. Only spouting words, you. No substance behind.

She glances backwards at the ruins and shakes her head.

No wonder.

She licks the milk running down her forefinger and grabs the bottom of the preacher's robe, almost yanking the whole thing off my naked self.

And that Eve. I'm telling you, Samuel, the Devil came back with her. Look at this evil doing. The Devil is back!

I stare at her, mute. The cow's grazing the patch of long grass growing at the legs of the windmill, which is oddly still intact, wheel dangling on its last thread. A runway of burnt grass is almost touching, leading back to where the front door once stood, now a

skeletal socket framing a hollow eye. Other patches and lumps of black and burnt are dotted round, patches and lumps my eyes ain't willing to focus upon. There's a box-sized section of barn still standing along the south corner, a candle quivering against the fractured pane of glass.

Does anyone need help in there? I ask, trying for neutral.

Thelma snorts.

We all need help.

She wipes her brow and squints at me.

Speaking of, you go to that cow yonder and do something practical yourself and start milking. Beginning of a new day here and we need some fresh juice for it. The rest of the folk are inside praying for the souls departed, and also for Eve now gone to the light, we hope. God bless her tarnished soul.

I look where she's looking and there is a cow yonder, close to the sheep and chickens grazing in a makeshift timber pen, but it's lying on its side, teats flowing something other than milk.

I nod slow, say nothing, then tread towards the dead cow and make a detour to the barn when Thelma's out of sight. I'm walking around the spine of the wreckage when I hear chanting coming from its bowels. Gloomy and droopy. My guts wrench. The morning is brightening by the minute, but my insides are darkening and I can't go to where that chanting is. Not now, not never.

Instead, I walk further along the spine where I left my yellows hanging over the washing tub. I find them curdled. I turn round, retrace my steps, grab a semi-filled pail of ash-lined milk leaning against a rake, then close by, a dead chicken, its feathers singed but otherwise whole. Then I plod back to the silo, face puckered and body throbbing and Bud on my tracks, slobbering.

What's wrong? Eve asks, watching me wheeze.

I've got a cold, I tell her, which given the state of affairs sounds weak.

She cringes at the chicken dangling in my grip.

I don't eat meat, she says.

You don't eat meat.

No.

I place a pail beside her, then my own sorry self against the outside wall of the silo, stripping the feathers off the chicken. If it wasn't for this feasting flu, I guess I would be more hungry, which I guess is a good thing, considering everything. When I'm done, I throw the carcass towards the bushes and Bud plays fetch. Then I wash my hands and enter the silo and lie down next to Eve.

Daylight is streaming into the inky space, casting warm rays over our recovering bodies. My vision swims to the view I had from the windmill, of the electrical lines hanging like abandoned skipping ropes over a hemorrhaging sea, a sea no doubt rising after last night's offerings.

I wonder how we're gonna make it, I tell her. I've seen what's out there and it's not good.

You mean the barn? Eve asks.

That, too. It's a heap of metal and wood. Folk are either gone, or going loopy. Animals seem sane, though.

Eve sighs heavy.

Pa's church folk were always loopy.

I shake my head.

Who needs aliens in a world already gone wonky?

What?

Nothing.

A pause hangs in the air.

Did Thelma make it?

I nod.

I need to go back to the barn, she says. See if anyone needs help. And to bury Samuel.

I swallow hard.

He's already buried. And I wouldn't go back just now. It's not...safe.

Eve gazes at me for a moment, then drops her head to her wound.

Samuel told me how they found you in that tree hollow, I tell her. I'm sorry.

Another pause, this time stretched out.

I suppose most of the animals have been swept out to the ocean along with most everyone else, she says.

Come again?

Animals survive better in raw nature than we do, she says flat, so I'd say we're fighting a losing battle. And who says we're more important than them? Who says we ever were?

She glances at Bud and crosses her arms.

None of us should have left the ocean in the first place.

I look at her.

That's giving up before you've even tried.

She shrugs.

Maybe it's called surrendering.

Surrendering's not giving up, I tell her. It's what comes beyond enduring.

You ever thought about not existing? she persists. Like how many days have we've got left here? Not sure about you, but I'm not keen on waiting out the inevitable.

I eyeball her. She's just survived a snake bite and she's talking about giving up.

A few years back, I tell her, my Pa was getting real aggressive. More so than usual. I ended up smashing a lamp over his head in self-defense. He was chiding me for skipping Church. I was fourteen. Church was all he knew. That and boxing and farming. Three things I was never interested in. Three things he hung his life on. It got too much - all that fear of being beaten up bad, or worse. So after that lamp incident, I took Ma's gun and hid it under my bed in case I ever needed to use it. Not for anyone else, but for a way out, you know?

She scowls at me.

So?

I squint at her and almost leave it right there. She can stew in her own self-pity. I take a deep breath and fan the fingers of my right hand and twist my forefinger into view. She gazes at the fault line running down its length.

You know something? I've dealt with broken bones and sore muscles and swollen joints so bad, each time I broke or tore or swelled, my whole body started screaming something was wrong. Every bit of me was standing to attention, fighting to heal wherever pain was happening, and it's amazing how the body fights.

Thing is though, bones and muscles and joints are housed under skin. Protected in their own casings. So any healing is quicker, any screaming muffled. Swaddled, you could say. But a cut? Now that's something else. That's a scream of a scream. That's a whole different fight.

I flex my forefinger closer to her gaze.

This happened when I was nine. Took one of Ma's kitchen knives and sliced an orange right through here. A rift of red gushed. At the bottom of that cut, where it pooled around the dying flesh, where life breathed beneath, there was no closure, no casings. It felt like I could have bled out on that cut. I remember gazing at it, wondering if the surrounding sinew would shut off its own valve if I just left it alone. Became dizzy just thinking about it.

Then my finger made that awful pulsing pump, like it does when your skin exposes your heartbeat. Felt as though my whole heart was leaking, so I panicked and grabbed an old hankie and stemmed the flow until I could find a big enough bandaid. Even then, when the bandaid went on, the pink soaked all the way through. You know those tiny pinprick holes that let the air in? Well, the wound just seeped through the plastic, making rivulets then a river, then a sea of red right down my arm. I was dazzled by the sight, mesmerized. I got all this in me, I thought, all this life swimming round. A living thing, tick-ticking of its own accord.

I realized right then and there that it was up to me to decide whether to keep it ticking or not. That day, I found I couldn't let myself go. I stood at attention and found a thicker bandaid. Hasn't always been that way, you know. And up until now, right about now actually, I'm realizing that no one can stop tomorrow coming, but anyone can stop himself from coming into tomorrow.

So, I'm not saying I'm more important than the animals, and I'm not saying they're more important than me, but my body is worth keeping alive because it tries keeping itself alive. Just like yours just did. Until it can't. Simple as that. Because of that.

Eve brushes her hair from her face and stares at me fierce.

Is that all you've got to say?

I nod.

Yeah.

Then why did you say you didn't know if we were going to make it?

I didn't say *if*. I said *how*. Me and Bud were on our way to the coast. Wasn't supposed to be the other way around, but maybe there's still a chance to get out of this sinking ship.

First of all, this isn't a ship, she snaps.

No, it's not. This is life, I snap back. If you want to bow out now, go ahead. It's called instinct - surviving like we have. Instinct and will. Just look around you. Even in the depths

of winter, pockets of green still poke through the snow. Haven't you noticed how things keep growing, regardless?

A scowl scorches the landscape of her face.

You haven't lived how I've lived, she says. You weren't abandoned in a fucking tree!

Tears start colliding her eyes as fire ignites mine. I make a fist.

You have no idea how I've lived or how I goddamn haven't! And anyway, no one's going to bother if you kick the bucket, especially if you kick it yourself.

Is that so? she says, turning on me. Well, let me tell *you* something. I've been living on instinct all my life. I'm just sick of not living on much else. And speaking of not bothering about buckets, what are you doing hanging around trying to fill up mine?

She drops her gaze to my clenched hand and freezes. I'm combusting and about to strike until I realize I'm about to strike and feel a beast for it. I lower my fist. Inhale deep. Exhale long.

Why did you steal my gun? Again?

She blinks, stutters. Spills.

I was trying to protect you.

Protect me.

Save you.

Save me.

Yes! OK? I was trying to save you.

I stare at her.

Then get busy saving yourself. Because no one else will.

I stomp right past and charge out the door and down the hill, leaving her staring out the empty mouth of the silo, at the sun rising above, hanging high in a sky too far away to care any either.

Chapter 16

Flick flash, flick flash, repeating. The flashing like fireflies but bolder. I'm coughing madly, the tickle becoming a itch I can't get at.

What are you doing? Eve asks.

Saving my Soul.

Saving *our* Souls, technically.

I frown.

Only technically.

You really think that's going to work?

Eve steps out the silo, watching me tilting her blade back and forth between the sun and the tin. I glance down and shut my eyes from the glare of the knife and the glare of the girl.

Samuel said emergency services would be on their way soon.

Eve raises her eyebrows.

Samuel said that?

Yeah, well, his gut said so. So.

The girl walks over and peers upwards. She's changed out of her robe same as I have. It's as much a relief to see her in normal clothes as it is for me to be wearing some.

It's not much to go on, but it's something, I say awkward.

It's a lot to go on.

It is?

Yeah.

Well, then.

My stomach flips while she keeps watching and I keep flicking.

Listen, she says next. I wasn't thinking clear before. Can we just...start over or something?

I offer a wink of a smile.

That's the idea.

My smile sparks another round of hacking, then a wallop of a sneeze. Eve grabs the pail and hands it over while Bud makes his appearance, padding out of the bushes with feathers glued to his gums.

At least someone's belly is happy, I say, lifting the pail and drinking with cupped hands.

You didn't eat any? she asks.

No matches.

No backpack either, I guess, she says, looking towards the barn.

No point even looking for it.

Eve dips into the silo and steps back out crushing something green and leafy in her hands. She hands the waxy wad over and the smell is stimulating and distinct. Fresh mint.

I raise my eyebrows.

Where did you get this?

Grows in lots of places, she says. You just need to know where to look.

She takes a pinch and starts rubbing the leaves over her teeth and tongue. I follow suit, then rinse.

Thanks.

No problem.

She's staring.

What?

That photograph, she says slow. Your Pa?

I throw her a look.

Yep.

Navy?

Almost.

I sigh deep.

I gotta tell ya, for the first time I feel truly sorry for the old man. Once young, with sights set on a world that halted at the first hurdle. Never seen him look as proud as he was in that photo - all decked out in blue and white, the ship's helm right behind him, a great wooden wreath - both of them scrubbed and primed for travel over seas wide and reaching.

I cup more water and splash it over my face and arms. Sigh again.

Pa once told me how he learned to swim. His own Pa threw him into the deep end. Just like that. Thought it was the best way to work things out. Thought his arms and legs would know what to do under threat. But Pa said arms and legs don't know what to do. They become jelly. No chance to warm up. That's why he started boxing me young. So that I could have a fighting chance. So that if I'm ever thrown in the deep end, I'd know what to do with my limbs.

Eve's gawking at me.

Your Pa almost drowned, she says straight.

Yep.

Did his Pa ever try that stunt again?

Nope.

So. I guess his Pa pulled him out.

Yep.

Why did he do it?

Pull him out?

No. Throw him in.

I shrug.

I guess he didn't know any better way to teach.

I start flicking the knife at the tin again, gazing at the heavens. The day's heating up, keeping some of the smoke trapped.

You know, Pa was always pushing me to join the Navy. I guess he wanted me to finish off what he started. He got as far as the Cadet Training vessel but jumped ship after he came down with a bad case of bullying. Senior Officers always give recruits a hard time and the pack was brutal that year and Pa just couldn't hack it. Took him an age to admit it to me. Well, he didn't tell me. His beer did. But there it is. He stuck with farming after that.

Was something he always knew about anyway - how to farm. Though he never quite left the sea. He called the Sky Station the Ship in the Sky. Anyhow.

And your Ma? she asks quiet.

What about her?

Was she around?

A smirk scratches my cheeks.

That's a good way to put it. Ma was around all the time, but she was always looking the other way. And Pa did the opposite - his face was either stuffed in mine or in a newspaper. I could barely breathe either way, with either of em. I suppose the only thing they had in common was that they were both searching for something.

She wipes dust off her shorts and points towards the flattened trees.

There's some crabapple and walnut trees a bit lower down. I'm going to collect as much fruit and nuts as I can, then head to the barn. See what can be shared out between us all.

I look at her.

I told you it's not safe. I'd stay close to the silo until things start calming down some, alright?

How come?

Thelma. She's not thinking straight. If she knows you're alive. Well, let's just say she'll think the Devil is too.

Her jaw drops.

You serious?

Wish I wasn't.

She shakes her head, then glances at the barn still singeing.

You know her well? The others? I ask her.

Sort of, she says solemn. Can we do questions another time?

I almost tell her she started it, but I offer a shrug instead.

She motions to the slope and starts walking.

Half an hour later, and I'm heady from lack of food and an abundance of sun, so I enter the silo where Bud's dozing in a blissful curve against the wall. Lying flat on my back next to him, I let the slight breeze cool my limbs and the position de-clog my nose. Must be

a minute or two, tops, before I shoot up again, shrieks and screams striking the silo's walls. Eve's shrieks, with Thelma's overtop and others layered between.

I yank on my boots and peer around the doorframe and Thelma's got a pitchfork in one fist, a large wooden cross in the other, and she's gaining on Eve who's yelling at me to grab my gun. I tug at the robe hanging on the hook, fumble around the pocket and yank the weapon out, hoping she put the bullets in correct. Just enough time for all of that for Eve to get round the back of me, leaving a ten foot stretch between us and Thelma and two men hobbling behind her - one old, the other older, eyes wide with wooden crosses aimed also.

I point my gun, and the men halt mid-hobble.

That a gun? Thelma shouts incredulous, halting now, too. She fiddles her eyeglasses and her cheeks flare red.

That's a gun!

Lips pinched, she starts running at me with the pitchfork held horizontal.

I stumble into Eve, startled. Bud stumbles into me, and then the three of us stumble anywhere Thelma ain't.

A battle cry from the woman as we gain ground, swerving around pieces of plane, bolting northwards clear across the summit towards the horse field, its fence half up, half down and providing no horses, but a level enough landing for something stirring yonder. Eve and I tilt our heads to the stirring. Faint wasps of wind growing wilder, then chopping the air in heavy clunks, a metal whale has flung from the floods, rising up and over the north side of Shackle, spinning its iron fins and sounding like hell's best attempt at heaven.

Chapter 17

Bud's dancing his eyebrows and circling wild. I'm yelling and waving and Eve's weeping and waving and Thelma's just yelling. The men are hobbling the other way, crouching from the clamor. For seconds, the helicopter judders and figure-eights, then clocks us and flies straight. Bud ducks behind me. Eve covers her ears and together we huddle under the blasts of air while the ground goose-bumps and the grass rises to a stiff ruffle, my lungs also rising with hope. The type Samuel went on about. The type with wings.

One of the pilots, skin summer-brown, gives us a thumbs up. The other pilot is winter-white compared and craning his head out the window, surveying the wreck of the barn instead of the wreck of us. There's a moment of indecision, the blue whale hovering, deciding where to beach. We're perched too close to the horse field. I tug Eve away from the fallen line of fence to give some space. Thelma's puffing and panting further back, in awe or shock or terror, I haven't a clue. And maybe all three.

The helicopter lowers while its blades come to a complete stop. The aircraft then settles as motionless as the windless air. The pilots unlock their belts, unstrap their helmets, open their doors and step down. Winter-white's clothed in army gear, summer-brown's wearing a dark blue one-piece and black strapped boots. Same as the paint work on the helicopter. Summer-brown waves as they get closer, an open enough smile. Winter-white, all frowns. Not much older than us. Mid-twenties, I figure. Hard to tell given their uniforms

and sprouting beards. We watch as the pilots stride closer and grow broader. Thick necks and tough handshake types. Big Jim types, only smarter looking.

When they're almost upon us, summer-brown nods real official and extends his hand. Benjamin.

I shake his hand. Eve introduces herself with a smile overspilling.

Benjamin turns to winter-white.

This is Reg. We're part of the county's rescue mission.

The other guy's frown is still etching.

Doesn't look pretty over there, Reg says. You the only ones who made it?

There's a few more, Eve says. The airplane hit the barn like a bomb.

No shit. Reg says, cocky. He keeps his gaze on Eve longer than a guy should. She throws me a glance and I'm about to say something when Bud starts whining. He's right up close with his paw hung in the air. I bend down and cuddle it in my hand. Must have been damaged in his mad circling.

We'll check the barn before we head, Benjamin says. How many others are we talking about?

There's five of us left, Thelma spouts from a distance.

She points at me and Eve.

Excluding them.

She says *them* like we're sin on toast.

But we're not going anywhere, she says next. We're waiting for someone else.

Benjamin rubs his chin.

You'll be waiting a long time, Mam. Rescue missions are getting thin on the ground.

Well, here's where I'm staying for now. Here's where I'm staying.

Thelma pleats her arms. Then she clasps the cross tight to her chest, side-glancing Eve. The pitchfork is stabbing the ground beside her.

Reg whistles low and eyes Benjamin, then me and Eve.

You all aware of what's been happening out there?

Communication's been nil, I tell him. Been worried all this time how far the disaster's spread out. Is the Sky Ship down or something?

Reg cocks his head. Ship?

Station.

How far do you think it's spread?

I dunno. Over half the world? The whole?

He throws his head back.

Sweet Jesus. It's bad, farm boy. I'll give you that. But not *that* bad. Thing is -

We don't know for certain, Benjamin cuts in.

The weather's hammering the southern coastline, running east to west, Reg continues. Ocean doesn't give a shit who she washes over once she gets going and she's hitting us wave after wave, but the rest of the country's doing just fine. So's the world, for that matter.

Benjamin grimaces.

For now.

Reg narrows his eyes.

Stop doing that, will ya? Quit being the pessimist. Normalcy's around the corner. We just gotta wait this crazy shit out.

Benjamin's jaw clenches but he otherwise stays mute. Reg spits on the ground, then scrapes his gaze past Thelma and me and settles on Eve.

The answer is no one knows for sure, Reg says. Government, scientists, not even the goddamn weather forecasters predicted this amount of mess. If Mother Nature could talk, well, then we'd know something. Maybe we'd know where to place our drenched asses next.

Seems she's talking loud and clear to me, I say. Anyways, our options were starting to run pretty low around here. Glad you two showed up when you did.

Benjamin's dark eyes turn a darker shade of sad.

Options are running out everywhere. Weather has never been this bad, ever. We've come across other survivors. Mostly along the coast. Mostly in ships. People are getting real low in morale. Our gas is low, too.

He glances over my shoulder towards Thelma's flaming face, then to the wreckage beyond, then further still to the valleys and hills sunken and soaking.

To be honest, he continues, we're surprised to see anyone alive this far deep in the county. The further inland you go, the bigger the earthquakes, though that part of the chaos seems to be over. Storms are still rolling in. Our base is thirty miles due east, on The Owls. On one of the campsites set for climbers. There's a decent medical hut, tents, a few provisions. We've had only scratches of communication from the Sky Station, but in the

interim, helicopters are flying to every raised pitching post and taking survivors to higher levels of elevation where the world's safer. Everyone will be living like goats - some for a short while, some for longer - but then the water levels will likely back off everywhere.

The Owls? I ask. You mean that mountain range near the coast?

More like *in* the coast. Anyhow, we're getting by, just. Resources are low. Relief efforts are finding it difficult to cover all areas.

How are you finding food?

It's finding us, Reg says. There's piles of creatures looking for grub themselves. Coming out of the woodwork day and night so it's easy pickings. Also, there's heaps of vegetation. Never knew such shit grew up there.

So what's the plan?

Reg laughs.

The plan?

He digs the toe of his boot in the soggy grass and a chunk flings to the side. He sets his denim blue eyes on Eve. My fists clench.

The plan is we live as long as we're able so that others can keep living past us. Always been that way, always will be. There's no way the weather's gonna drown me before I get a chance to escape. No way it's gonna have the last word.

Benjamin rolls his eyes. Reg doesn't notice. Reg spits again on the ground, two inches from my feet. Grimy gob, streaked with tobacco, left cheek deflating with every spit. Big Jim flashes in my vision and I go livid.

Humans weren't born on this earth to be forever buried in it, Reg rattles on. Who does nature think we are? Fucking dinosaurs?

When you put it like that, I tell him. We don't stand a chance in hell.

Reg stomps right up to my face. Didn't see that coming.

What did you just say?

I said, stomping an inch closer, We don't have -

That's enough, Eve says, raising her hand like a stop sign.

We've all been through a lot here. As Jack said, we're glad you showed up. Let's just leave it at that.

She keeps her hand raised while me and Reg corner-glare, his denim blues smudging with dirt. He breaks first. I release my fists. Eve lowers her hand.

Thelma, meanwhile, is booting it back to the barn, looking over her shoulder all the while like we're gonna pounce.

What's her problem? Reg asks.

Eve shrugs and points to the sky. Everyone has issues with management, she says. I guess it just depends which department you're in.

You mean the Sky Station?

No. God.

Reg shrugs.

Same thing.

Benjamin wipes his hand over his mouth, turns towards the barn.

We should check out the situation over there and see if anyone else wants our help.

This time, I'm stop-signing.

Trust us, I tell him. You don't want to go there.

Silence, then submission.

Fine, he says. Is that all you've got on you? We've never been out this far at this time of day. Caught sight of the smoke hovering over the hill, so we had to inspect, but we need to get back before dark. Our headlights are busted.

I look at Eve and she mouths knife and I pat my back pocket discreet.

We're good, she says, then pats her own pockets bulging with nuts and fruit.

Benjamin nods and motions to the helicopter. Reg is already on his heels and turning around and walking off.

You go on ahead, I tell Eve. I need to check Bud's paw and see if I need to carry him across.

We exchange glances and she starts walking and Benjamin watches her go, which gives me the seconds I need to bend down to collect my gun hiding underfoot in the long grass. I thrust it quick into the back of my jeans with my shirt hanging out and over, then keep bent, inspecting Bud.

She your girlfriend? Benjamin asks.

I crack a grin.

Don't know what she is.

He throws me a glance.

I get it.

Reg. He always an asshole?

He considers me.

Being an asshole's all relative at this stage of the game. These types of situations bring out the worst and best in people, plus everything in between. But yeah, Reg is an asshole.

He throws me a glance but says nothing. I keep bent and give Bud a good once over, mostly for effect.

Benjamin rubs his jaw.

Speaking of situations, he says, how'd you escape the disaster in your part of the woods?

I stand up and wipe my hands on my jeans.

By being in them, I guess. The ground split in front of me, right at the edge of the forest. Somehow the rock I was lying in didn't budge much. Was fast asleep when it all started. Then I woke up.

He shakes his head.

Damn.

I shrug.

Knew something big was coming, like I guess we all have, what with the recent changes in weather. The droughts and all. But now I feel like I have a plan ahead of me. An out. You?

Pretty much the same thing.

Benjamin opens his mouth to say more but stops short.

Well look at that, he says, bending over and collecting something from the mud-splotched earth.

It's mine, I say, tense as fuck.

You sure about that?

The pilot gives me an eye-full before turning the gun over and rubbing the dirt off. He clicks the safety catch.

Glock nineteen. Nine inches. Armed?

Two bullets.

He checks the magazine.

And you sure you're not one of them?

One of who?

He motions towards the ruins.

The crosses.

I inhale.

Never have been.

Well, God forgive me anyway, he says and points the gun at his forehead.

My heart spasms. Then, just as quick, Benjamin laughs and lowers the gun to his side and clicks the safety back on.

See that? he announces. That's what you do when things get nasty. Don't hesitate. Just do it. If I'm in your line of fire, shoot me first. If you're the only one getting in the way, well, you strike me as a good man, and good men do good things in any situation.

I stare at him, then shoot a glance at Reg with a wrench in his grip, fiddling with the engine. Eve's got her back to us, too.

What are you getting at?

You know what I'm getting at, he says straight. Hell, you're the one who owns a gun.

He hands me the weapon sideways. I take it and shove it deep in my front pocket, shaking a little.

A cattle call. It's Reg, telling us to make a move on. We start walking, Bud limping at my side. I frown, then pick him up. We arrive with Reg tapping the glass of the cockpit window and Eve leaning against the passenger door. I release Bud and he shuffles over to Eve and wags at her. Reg is picking his nails, bored as a schoolboy.

You made it then, he yawns.

Give it a rest.

Reg shoots Benjamin a look, then opens the door of the helicopter and grabs his helmet off the seat.

We gotta get back pronto, *Captain*.

We'll be fine, Benjamin says, pinching his lips. There's enough light left.

I'm not talking about the light. I'm talking about the gas. We got ourselves a leak.

Reg hands Benjamin the wrench. He treads to the engine, opens the hatch and twists the cap off, frown furrowing.

You good? I ask Eve, wiping my snotty nose.

She nods.

Benjamin seems decent enough. But that other guy -

Don't worry, I tell her. I've got your back.

I was going to say the same thing, she says, serious. He's got something against you.

And that would be you, I almost say.

Just stay calm, she says. Least til we know what we're dealing with.

I look at her.

How'd you get so bold?

She shrugs.

I was born bold.

She scours the barn, then me.

You could have shot her, you know.

I nod slow.

But you're not the killing kind.

I stare at her.

Not sure I'm the fighting kind, either.

Her eyes start twinkling.

Now, I wouldn't be so sure about that.

Benjamin steps up with a bottle of water.

The leak's small enough. Was able to tape it up, but I'll keep monitoring the situation.

Trip will take forty minutes. When we arrive, you'll need your cold seeing to and your dog's paw, too.

He glances at Eve's forearm, the double rainbow now an innocuous tattoo.

Was that a snake bite?

Yep.

He rubs his jaw.

Damn.

Eve takes a swig from the bottle and hands it to me. I gulp the rest as she steps up and into the passenger seat. Then I hoist Bud up and buckle him in the middle seat, then belt myself. Benjamin flicks the switch and the blades kick into motion, but then they whirl down in a hurry, landing us soft as butter without the aircraft lifting an inch.

What's going on? I shout above the din.

Benjamin points towards the ruins.

In the distance, gray ghosts are standing in the smoky heat alongside the jumble of barn, wavering amongst wood and metal and cauterized grass. Ghosts with arms held flat against their bodies, heads level and looking on. A line of defense, or offense.

Reg says something to Benjamin and the Captain nods and flicks the button and the blades start rotating again.

Wait! Eve calls out, unbuckling and tapping Benjamin on the shoulder.

He keeps the blades rotating slow. Reg bucks against his seat, cursing. I unbuckle and follow Eve outside and stand attention while one of the ghosts steps forward.

She's petite, though growing larger by the second. One shoe missing, though walking steady.

When she gets close, I walk towards her and she holds out her palm and nods towards the helicopter.

He's come, she says.

I take her palm. Look her straight in the eye.

You sure?

Tombs have more than one exit, Joan says.

Then she steps on board.

Chapter 18

The look on my dog's face as we start lifting...

This ain't the time to be scared of heights, I tell him, squeezing my eyes and squeezing his fur and holding my breath as the blades spin faster, the helicopter tilting and chattering loud as a blowhole and I'm glad I've got nothing in my belly to blow out. Next minute, Eve's hand clasps round mine and I open one eye to her pale skin glowing greener, too.

When the helicopter levels, Benjamin cranks his neck and gives us a thumbs up. I manage to give one back, forcing both eyes open which somehow calms the shakes. What's happening below is enough distraction, besides.

Roads have mutated to serpents shifting under a tea-stained sea, buildings are fractured bones slumped in broken bodies, valleys have turned bathtubs, filling right up. Everything once living or used by the living, floating aimless. Then, in the far distance, the mountain range. I've seen photos of The Owls and their bordering harbor in local history books at school. My heart bumps against my ribs. I'm about to see a real harbor and a real sea, though from this distance I'm looking at a child's drawing - a thin pencil line horizon, lead colored.

Snowy Owl, white-capped and snuggled between Brown and Tawny, is standing tallest. All three are perched on the edge of the coastline hungry for land. High tides would be an understatement. Can just make out what's left of the half-moon harbor straddling the shoreline - an old man's gum line with tiny boats like teeth tethered to the main dock. If a

ship pulled up now, a sailor could almost step from those mountains straight onto the deck. I smile at that. Like I can see that happening. Like I can see that happening to me. Suddenly, my insides feel better. Glancing at Eve, she's looking less reptilian, too. Bud's still frozen in shock, though at least he's staying put, and Joan sitting opposite hasn't stopped smiling since we took off.

Just when I'm relaxing some, Reg shouts something to Benjamin and points dead ahead. I peer through the gap between their helmets and see clouds. Lots of them. Dark as ash. Benjamin motions back to where we came from. More head shaking and I can't hear much of anything until a waft of speech flies by my ear,
Freak Storm.

Fuck's sake. My jaw tightens and a heavy eeriness vibrates through the airspace. I'm waiting for Benjamin to turn and toss another thumbs up, but he's got both thumbs on the controls driving us down a different path. Banking sharp to the left, to be exact. Turning away from the squall and heading towards the backside of The Owls. Reg barks at him again, gesturing wild. Then out of nowhere and in one swift motion, Reg releases his seatbelt and with one hand on the controls, he wacks Benjamin on the side of his head with his other hand. Then another thump, harder, jamming Benjamin's helmet up past his ear. His body rams against the door and then he folds like a puppet on the floor. Eve yelps like a banshee and I snap my seatbelt off as Reg plonks down in his seat, his hands on the controls, leveling the helicopter's pitching.

What the hell are you doing? I yell at him. You're heading straight for the squall!

I reach past Joan towards the front and grip his shoulder, steadying myself more than anything threatening.

Keeping us the fuck alive, he yells back.

He tugs his shoulder my from grip.

I glance at Benjamin. No movement. Panic strips my insides. I think of my gun, but Reg's got his hands on a bigger weapon. I reach for Benjamin instead.

Leave him, Reg commands. This way we get a chance to land before it gets too dark to land at all.

I stare from one man to the other, to the mass of ash less than half a mile away, yawning wide. Rain misting underneath.

Goddamn it, pilot, just get us through!

Nothing more to be done, nothing less to be said. I hobble to my seat, dump down and yank the seat belt across my shoulders like I'm making a cross. Then I do make a cross for Bud and Eve and Joan. For not wanting any of them to go out under the joystick of some maverick prick.

I brace Bud as Reg dips the bow of the helicopter, lowering altitude. He banks right, dipping further as we enter the pool of gray. The mist turns to hail and beats at the roof, wanting in. My belly is hollow and raining black. The rest of me, black and raining hollow.

Then everything shaking thunder, rattle, dark. Every muscle taut and I'm gripped and calling on whoever is up, around or below, asking to live and last til I can't ask no more. More thunder and rattle and raising up, down, then almost stopped. Then, after what seems like miles of rocking and rolling, the pool of clouds part to a pale pink and the metal whale starts blowing its usual thunder and swims level again. Nightmare turning doable dream as the sky turns back to sky and The Owls reappear through the jaws of a dusk still feeding on the day's dying light.

I breathe relief. Reg pumps his fist. Eve exhales and Bud's stiff as wood. Joan's not smiling anymore but at least she hasn't freaked. Her eyes are closed and her palms are touching. Everyone settling down, I crane my neck to check on Benjamin still hibernating on the cockpit floor. I start unclasping my seatbelt as Eve shakes her head.

Let me, she mouths.

I watch as she gets up and leans close to Reg. A few words between them and she bends across Benjamin's seat, fingertips finding his neck pulse. She sends me a small thumbs up. Then she rips a bit of loose fabric from her shorts and pats at the liquid still trickling from his ear.

I think I got a boo-boo, too, Reg taunts. A big one.

Eve ignores him flat out, which is just as well since it calms me down an inch and Benjamin needs attention. His chin is lifting and he's mouthing something and raising one arm like a tentacle looking for land. Tries pulling himself up with the other arm but gives up and crunches back to sitting. Eve holds him steady, buckling herself in his seat.

I lean back and look out the window, feeling less than useful but shivering with excitement because there it is. The sea. Spread out wide like it has all the time and right in the world. Lapping and relaxing and quenching its own sweet self and the sight would be overwhelming enough on level ground let alone from such dizzying heights, and seeing it

now - this wet wet sky, bluer than blue, deeper than deep, far bluer and deeper than the sky above or earth below - in this moment, it doesn't matter if I'm going, coming, or gone because for the first time ever, disaster or none, I feel like I'm returning somewhere that isn't home.

I peel my eyes from the water to the mountains and notice shutters of light flicking the peaks and more light haloing the mountain top, glistening the snow like angels playing. Looks like we're heading straight for Snowy since we're passing stumpy Brown on the port side, the harbor changing size from half moon to quarter. A sprinkling of what looks to be fireflies start sparking along the lower rim of Snowy's face. The closer we get, and the fireflies morph into a path of candles lit in paper bags - a path that leads to a makeshift landing pad with a white cross painted in the middle. A few hands are waving. The helicopter hovers closer and drops, and the air whirls around a man and woman who are running closer to the pad. The woman's hair is standing on electric-shock-end and their shirts are almost blowing off. Reg grounds the aircraft like he's slapping a toy on a tilting moon.

Cursing and gripping the handle above my seat, I wait til we land fully before surveying the immediate surroundings. The landing pad is a square piece of sandy soil with boulders shouldering. The man's a splitting image of Reg, only older, with short-cropped silver hair instead of russet, and leathery skin and rounded shoulders hunched. The woman is younger, dark curls pulled in a ponytail, wearing white like a wedding. She hangs back for a second, waiting for the blades to settle down. When the man gets close, he stops and squints at the cockpit and rubs his long stubble. I rub my own scratch of sand. Before anyone can say anything, Reg whips his helmet off and opens the door and exits.

Wonder what version he's gonna give, I mutter.

The truth. Enough.

Benjamin's come alive, releasing his helmet strap with shaky fingers, spots of red blooming along his jaw line. Balancing on the door frame, he opens the window and spits out a mound of pink gob and then fires his eyes towards Reg, clouds of smoke billowing from his nostrils in the chilled mountain air. If he could charge, he would.

You got knocked out bad, I tell him. Think that's the worse of it, though. Still, the bastard needs some reckoning with.

Benjamin glowers.

I may be the higher ranking pilot, but Reg is the higher ranking survivor. At least he thinks so. Leave it be. Less trouble that way.

He spits another round out the window.

I motion towards the two men standing profile.

That his Pa?

Benjamin nods, touching the wound by his ear. He winces as fresh blood spills.

Stay out of his way, too.

The woman in white pants and pinafore strides forth with a first aid kit in her grip. She steps up and enters the cockpit, eyes flitting at Joan and Eve before holding her gaze on me. She brushes her fingers through her fringe.

I'm Seren, she says. Head Nurse. Who needs attention first?

I nod towards Benjamin, then at Bud still strapped in his seat behind her line of vision. She cocks her head and grins at my dog, then places the kit on the co-pilot's seat and opens the lid and pulls out scissors and a roll of bandage.

The medical hut is closest to the landing pad, she says. We'll get you over there first. She steps towards Benjamin and starts wrapping the bandage tight around his head, then mops up the blood on the seat.

What happened here, then?

Short story, he says. Just focus on getting these guys comfortable.

You know the protocol, Ben. Everyone needs to check in.

The nurse makes to say something else, but sighs instead and closes the kit and looks out of the cockpit window at the two men talking in hushed tones. My muscles tighten.

I overheard Reg telling Saul in passing where he found you all. Thought there'd be no one left to find. Was worried you'd make it back at all. I saw that gale brewing over the ocean. Like we haven't had enough thrown at us. Anyways. Welcome to the Owls. We operate like a border control so you'll all be scanned. We're kind of it in terms of population count in this county, so we have to know what's coming in and what to keep out.

You've got power here? I ask her.

I don't mean that type of scanned, she says. I mean old fashioned body checks.

Eve and I exchange glances.

Movement outside of the helicopter. Reg and the older man approaching. At the same time, Bud starts wriggling, wanting out. I hobble towards, unbuckle and hook Bud under

my right arm while the older man enters the cockpit with Reg lagging behind, his face a mixture of sheep and wolf.

Griffiths. Saul.

The man stretches his hand but it's not matching the one I can shake with so I just nod.

Jack. Scott.

Scott, welcome.

No, that's my last name.

He raises an eyebrow, then turns to Eve.

Eve, she says, reaching a hand.

He offers a wide grin then turns to Benjamin, scowl crawling.

Reg filled me in on what happened out there. Said you were putting everyone in more danger than was necessary. Said that part of the storm was a lot flimsier than you made it out to be and he was able to get through the heart of it in a flash. That so?

Benjamin exhales.

You'll have to ask them. I was otherwise occupied.

Saul eyeballs him, then turns to me.

So?

Yep, I say sharp. All show and no substance.

Then we're good, Saul says, eyeing Reg. There won't be any more rescue missions to contend with, anyhow. Too little fuel. We need to stay put and prepare for what's coming.

He tips his head towards me and Eve and Joan.

Consider yourselves fortunate. You're the last survivors we've had the time to find.

Joan starts asking what he means when Seren interrupts, saying night's drawing in soon and we have to make a move. Reg exits first, then Benjamin with Seren walking alongside, steadying him all the while, followed by Eve, then Joan. I tag along with Bud tucked in my arms, Saul taking up the rear. After five or six steps, we all halt. A howling in the far distance, towards the top of the mountain. Faint but forceful.

Wolves, Saul says to my back. Been hovering for days.

Eve tilts her head to the mountain top. A shiver shoots up my ribs.

Reg starts walking again, cautious. We follow on, listening to the howling ebb and flow then finally go, my attention turning to the path that's narrowing abrupt, the cliff edge

becoming way too close for comfort. I keep my eyes pinned on Joan's back. When we get almost clear of the boulders leaning against the rock face, I look over my shoulder and tell Saul I have to relieve myself.

He grimaces.

We're on a roll here, buddy, he says. Can't it wait?

I make a face.

Been holding it in all flight.

Another grimace and he nods to the largest boulder and I lever myself around the back of it. I lower Bud and squat out of sight and take my time, fishing out the weapons soundlessly and stuffing them in a deep enough slit with a noisy round of coughing. By the time I'm done, Bud's back in line sitting next to Joan.

All good? she says, patting him tender.

Yeah, I tell her. All good.

Saul motions us to continue. I pick up Bud and follow Joan, Saul treading close behind.

A few minutes later and I'm smelling pine needles and wood smoke and cigarettes and hearing the faintest traces of female voices and a clattering of pots. My belly starts drooling. A dozen more steps and the narrow ledge widens to a flat sheet of grassy land with hiking paths like veins leading up the mountain side.

As generic a base camp as I've ever seen and I may as well be looking at a crowd of Girl Scouts sitting round a fire roasting marshmallows and singing Kumbaya. There's a handful of men sprinkled, a girl huddled close to an older woman, but mostly women, around thirty in number and thirty years old, sitting on tarps and flattened backpacks. We walk closer and one by one, they stare at us, weary and wary. Not smiling. Definitely not singing.

Group of hikers? I ask, uneasy.

Good guess. A few guides were hired, plus Seren to deal with any injuries. You could say she's been kept real busy, treating minds as well as bodies.

Joan stops walking and I almost bump into her. She turns round and stares at Saul with blue eyes crinkled.

That's it? she asks. No one else managed to get up here?

A few locals climbed up, he says, shrugging. And those that didn't climb, crawled. And those that couldn't crawl, clawed.

How did you make it up? I ask him.

He clears his throat.

Reg and I flew in with Benjamin.

How many others have you rescued by helicopter since?

Three. Plus you two.

I shake my head.

That's small numbers.

That's reality. Anyways, a bigger rescue's on its way. Could be two or three days, but I'm guessing sooner if the chaos wraps up and the wind keeps blowing in the right direction.

There's movement in the crowd. It's the girl, leaning away from the older woman and bee diving to Saul. Up close, her face is a splash of freckles, her expression jittery.

Sir? she says hyper. Is the ship coming soon?

He scratches his head.

Yes.

How soon?

Don't know.

The girl wrings her hands.

I think another storm's coming.

Could be.

It is. My skin's getting itchy again. Bobby's up the mountain, keeping watch.

He rolls his eyes.

Could be.

So, how soon -

Christ almighty.

The man taps his wrist pod.

Like I keep telling everyone, communication's still patchy. Soon as I know, you'll all know.

He waves her away. She dips her chin, timid, then tosses me and Joan a glance before walking back to the campfire.

I follow Joan's gaze towards the sea. The view's partly obstructed by a thick curve of rock, but there's a gap showing white-capped waves winking.

Where's the ship going to take us? she asks.

East coast. The storms are traveling west so we've likely had the worst of it. There's also bigger refugee camps, and better means to get the displaced back to where they came from when all this clears up. If it does.

He looks towards the sky. Sighs heavy.

We have all the technology to pin something up in space, but some beastly weather comes along, and just like that, our central sun turns into a quivering tea light.

He sighs again. Starts walking away.

What if people don't want to go back?

The question flies out before I have a chance to rein it in. He turns round and I look at him awkward.

Other states can only babysit outsiders for so long, he says curt. That's why America's got limits on foreign entry to begin with. But first we have to get out of this mess to get back in.

And we will.

He stares at me.

That so?

We have to, I tell him. Else what's the point of leaving home in the first place?

Chapter 19

Joan touches my arm. Saul starts tapping his foot.

This way, he says tight. He steers towards a tent with a white cross pinned on the flap.

Seren will see to you, then we'll eat. You like goat's meat?

I nod.

Right about now, I like anything.

Another twenty steps and we enter the medical hut. A sharp beam of light from an oil lantern hits my eyelids, making me sneeze in Saul's face. He recoils.

The majority of us have just gotten over a round of colds, he barks. Best you stay quarantined til you can keep yours to yourself.

I mumble an apology while Seren walks over with a tissue. Behind her there's a cot bed next to a cotton screen dividing the room. The other cot is crowded with Benjamin's shadow. He's lying on his back, unmoving. Bud's lying in the nearest corner, licking his paw.

Eve's in the latrine, Seren says before I get to ask. She'll head to the campfire from there. Joan, I'll check your clothes first.

Joan walks forwards, arms raising up, fingers lifting her silver cross necklace for all to see. Seren runs her hands over Joan's ragged dress and tights, then asks for the lone shoe. She bends down and slips it off and then hands it over.

That feels better, Joan says, grinning.

Seren smiles back. You're welcome at the campfire, she says. We'll all join shortly.

Joan nods and exits the tent and as she does, a shriek punctures the air.

I sprint past Saul and Seren towards the fire. Folk are spilling out of their tents, rushing and congealing around a boy. He's emerging from the far path, bloody and mangled and staggering towards. The freckled girl's hysterical, still shrieking and pulling at the older woman who breaks free and rushes across the campsite. She's a few feet away when the boy collapses to the ground, thudding hard, neck spilling liquid and legs stretching limp like the stuffing's been taken out. The woman lunges and lifts the boy's shoulders, tears raining down her chin and onto his cheeks, blending with his blood.

Help! she cries.

Saul gets to them first.

Seren. Supplies!

The nurse is right behind him, near on colliding into his shins. She pushes him out of the way and thrusts her fingers to the boy's neck. Blood pumps even more. Seren wipes her forehead, anguish smeared across her face, red lines also. Her hands drop to her knees, then one arm goes around the woman's heaving shoulders.

Cila. He's gone. Bobby's gone, Cila.

The woman starts wailing and Seren starts rocking her, looking towards Saul, who's looking towards a woman with a cot sheet wrapped around her arms. Saul steps over and takes the sheet and walks over to Seren. Seren nods, then says hush to the mother,

There's nothing we can do now. He was trying to do good. You know that.

Saul fans the sheet over the boy's body. The mother rips it back off.

Don't! she bawls.

Saul doesn't protest. Instead, he lays the sheet next to her and treads back to the crowd, chin lowered, fists in balls.

Folk start rippling away, heading in different directions, forming small knots of discussion. I overhear snippets from the nearest knot: West side. Above the tree line. Son's favorite lookout spot...

I spot Eve alone, hovering afar, hand covering her mouth, eyelids shut tight. Then she opens her eyelids and slumps away. As I make my way towards her, something hard taps my shoulder and my muscles almost spring out of my body. It's Reg. Snarling.

You should be back in that tent, farm boy. Keeping yourself to yourself and away from infecting everybody.

Could say the same about you.

Quiet, you.

Joan walks over and eyeballs Reg.

He motions to the wailing mother.

You should be telling that to her. Who knows how many people have died around her, and she's acting as though it's happening for the first time.

The biggest smirk I've ever seen on a human being, and the biggest fist I've ever seen on me, and I punch that son of a bitch square in the face. Just like that. Knuckles to nose. And down he goes. Just like that. And then Joan's at my side, guiding me back to the medical tent with the crowd staring on.

A crowd stunned, and silenced.

Chapter 20

Seren dips a second cloth in a bucket of water and wipes the rest of death off her arms and neck and then steps inside the medical hut.

Your turn, she says.

Takes me a second to register what she's on about, but then she points to my shirt and I raise my arms and the nurse travels her fingers down my chest to my jeans.

I take my boots off, then put them back on in a hurry, embarrassed by the stench.

The girl doing OK?

Seren sighs.

She's with her mother. Joan's consoling both.

Footsteps thunder towards the tent. The nurse and I exchange glances. A whip of the flap and Saul barges in, stomps right up, wraps his fingers round my throat.

You lay a finger on my son again, and you'll have my fingers doing a lot more than what they're doing now, you got me?

He's about a foot taller and two times wider and I can feel the bruises already marking my skin.

Seren steps up.

You didn't see what happened. Reg was provoking him.

Saul ignores her.

You got me?

I try nodding.

Good.

He releases his fingers and glances at Benjamin, then walks back to the entrance, to the sounds of a mother still sobbing.

I'm going to eat, he sighs, glancing back. That's about all we can do for the time being. Then I'm going to check the signal. At this rate, by the time the Sky Station gets the message through, the real thing could be right on our doorstep, waiting to dock.

Don't mind him, she says in his wake. Stress tends to do that to people.

Do what? I rasp.

She sighs.

Turn them into the type of people they've always been.

The nurse sighs and walks over to Bud.

So, what happened to his paw?

Rubbing my neck, I ease my body onto the cot.

He went crazy when the helicopter arrived. Think he stubbed it or something. He's not making much noise about it, but I know he's hurting.

She crouches next to him as I get comfortable on the mattress. The springs are squeaking like demented chicks but otherwise I'm lying on pure luxury - a real bed with real sheets. Makes me think of who's lying on the other bed.

How you doing over there? Benjamin?

He's sedated, Seren says. Been under a lot of strain.

I shift uncomfortably.

Your dog's a real cutie, she says. What breed?

Cross between a mutt and a mutt.

She smiles, then gives him another pat before inspecting his paw.

I'm no Vet, she says after a minute, but he's better off than he looks. Some swelling is all.

She cuts a strip of bandage and wraps his paw, then slides a bowl of water under his chin. Bud gives her a small lick, sniffs the bandage, then drinks like a funnel. She grins and touches the silver head of the stethoscope hanging around her neck while she walks over. When she plants the cold coin on my chest, asking me to inhale deep, a coughing fit erupts.

Hold on, she says. I think we've got something for that cough.

A vision comes flying of Ma holding a spoon to my mouth years ago. Medicine for mumps. Vile tasting and scarlet red. Was barely able to hear what she was saying due to clogged ears and a raging fever making everything dim and dopey, so she said it twice.

These things make you stronger, son. The illness, and the medicine. And you need to be strong because you're meant for a healthier life than this. A blooming life. You hear me? A blooming life.

A pat on my forearm breaks the vision.

Sorry, Seren says. We're all out.

It's OK, I tell her, tasting the scarlet anyway.

She wipes her brow.

We'll all be out of here soon enough, with any luck.

I consider her.

Excuse me for saying, I tell her, but you seem pretty upbeat compared to the rest of the group, especially taking into account what's just happened.

Oh, I'm used to living it rough. Spent half my life in the mountains, and half of that working as a nurse for hiking and skiing competitions. Seen lots of injuries. Fatalities, too. Pa used to take me camping all the time as well. Makes your skin tough. Don't get me wrong, though. There was panic at first. Plenty of it. That wave was petrifying. I was waiting here for the group to finish their hike and they had almost arrived when the ocean changed. From our elevation, it looked like a big soup bowl beginning to ladle. So wide reaching. Couldn't see the beginning or end of it. The sight was breathtaking. The sound when it broke against the mountain, though? That wasn't a sea sound. More like the earth was roaring. A giant mumbling crunch. Terrifying.

Though somehow it also felt good. Like something beyond us was finally breaking free. In that moment, you know what? I felt it was OK to die to that. To something bigger. Then all hell broke loose. That one wave kept rising and rising, crushing most of the harbor, the trees. Everything. The way that hiking group scurried down like a bunch of mice... seemed like the water was coming right up to our ankles, that's how it quickly it rose. Days back, it was much higher than it is now. I guess that's a good sign. The earth is starting to sponge herself up. Mother Nature is a wondrous thing.

Bullshit.

We snap our heads to Reg bulldozing the entrance, purple patches lapping his eyelids.
He ignores me and strides towards Seren, making to smack her on the butt.

Mother Nature was giving herself a good old bitch slap with that wave of hers, that's what.

Seren springs away just in time.

Geez, Reg. Nothing keeps you down, does it?

He pierces his lips and blows some half-baked tune, warbling and rocking on his heels and he's tipsy. Can smell it on his breath. Sour whiskey.

Dinner's ready, he breathes down her neck. I'd be glad for a bit of company.

She offers a smile before pulling away.

Not tonight, big boy. I'm on duty.

That so? Reg says, staring at me cold and sharp.

His scowl turns into a sloppy grin while he stumbles across to Benjamin.

Looks like things are all wrapped up here to me.

Reg whacks Benjamin's leg and he jerks awake and I spring up. The guy isn't drunk.
He's deranged.

Leave him alone, I tell him tight.

Reg stomps over, lips tight, fists tighter.

You want to tell me that again, cowboy?

Seren steps over.

Stop it, she says.

She throws me a look and steps closer to Reg.

Come, let's go.

She's pulling at his shirt but he's still thinking about it.

Tell me, cowboy. What kind of work did you get up to on that there farm of yours?
Milking the cows? Feeding the chickens? Plucking the weeds?

I stare at him, words congesting, veins pumping.

Uh huh, he says, nodding. Did you do get up to anything else?

I boxed.

His lips twitch.

That so? A boxer.

No. Just boxed.

He squints, leans a little away.

Uh huh.

Come on, Reg. Let it go.

You and me? He slurs, leaning on Seren, but glaring at me. We got to work this thing out. We gotta work this here thing out.

He punches the last words and swerves towards, but Seren pulls him back and steers him to the flap.

Hey. You OK? I ask after her.

She stops short, glances over her shoulder, walks on.

Hey!

I follow her out of the tent. Reg is stumbling ahead, swaying, holding a hip flask and tipping it to his lips. I grab Seren's elbow and she spins around.

I'm trying to help you out here, she says tense.

You don't have to do this, I tell her. I can stand up for myself.

She places her hand on my chest and looks me straight in the eye.

Like I said, Jack, I'm used to living it rough.

I hold her gaze for a moment, then watch as she turns on her heels and catches up to Reg. She reaches for his waist and he swings an arm around her shoulders. They join the campfire where I spot Eve standing in line with an empty plate waiting to be served. Willing myself to calm down, I re-enter the tent and pull the curtain across and find Benjamin on his back, mumbling something. On the beside table, there's a box of aspirin and a bottle of valium and another bottle of another something. He's awake, though his eyes are fluttering. I walk over and stand next to the cot. After a few minutes of listening to garble, the flap opens and Eve walks in holding the plate piled with meat plus the rest of her nuts and fruit.

Hey there.

She steps towards and hands me the food, then goes to Bud, pulling a fatty bit of bone from her pocket. His tail thumps the ground. I sit on the cot and start digging in at the same time as Bud. Now that I've started chewing something, I'm ravenous. Eve watches us gorge.

Tell me you've eaten, I ask her.

She shrugs.

Berries, mostly. And a can of rice and peas. There's stores left. The woman I was sitting next to told me there's a permanent bunker dug in the ground for emergencies.

Guess this is one of those emergencies.

Eve lowers her voice to a whisper.

Where did you put the knife and gun?

A cavernous yawn and Eve jolts. She turns to Benjamin.

He's sedated, I tell her.

She raises her eyebrows and walks towards and looms over his chest. He sputters syllables. Then, out of nowhere, his fingers reach out and clamp her forearm. Eve flinches, then she slants closer, listening to his mounds of mumble.

You're in the medical tent along with me and Jack, she says. We're not going anywhere. Take your time.

Benjamin's head sinks back into the pillow.

No time, he mutters.

Benjamin?

She rubs his shoulder but his eyes are closing and his muscles are slackening and his breath is going back under.

Dammit.

I gobble the last bites and stand next to Eve.

Something ain't right, I tell her. Reg. He came in here just now. Drunk. Threatening. Spouting stuff. I know I hit him and all, but -

You did?

Yeah.

I look for a reaction but she stays neutral.

I also don't like the way he looks at you.

Eve blushes.

That woman sitting next to me said everyone's starting to unravel, too. No one knows if rescue is coming, let alone when. I'm just happy to hear there's still a chance, you know?

I nod, smiling at her.

Exactly. Saul told me the weather's moving on and resources are in place. If there's a world still out there, then there's still a way out.

I start relaying more details when the tent shivers from a bustle of movement. Someone's shouting and it's echoing off the mountain bowl, rippling straight over. Can't make out anything from the racket. Bud stretches and hobbles over, nervous. His muzzle brushes my outstretched fingers. I tuck him under Benjamin's cot and tell him to stay put while Eve wraps her mop of blonde into a knotted bun. She throws me a glance, then darts towards the entrance, then waves for me to come. I follow her outside towards a group of people gathered next to the girl who's standing and panting and pointing towards the horizon.

It's coming! she cries. It's coming straight for us!

Chapter 21

The girl sprints to the path linking campsite to landing pad, the crowd on her heels with Eve and I flanking, our jaws dropping at the sight of a massive blanket swirling. Slate-gray tunnels are spinning down and hitting the water, creating a spiky shroud covering a shivering sea. Far away, but growing in rage and speed and no sound. No sound other than a smothering hum.

Looks like a family of tornados, a woman says. If they are, they rarely climb mountains.

They sure do, another says. Saw the same type of swirls in the news last year when the weather patterns started changing. Got to eleven thousand feet before it petered. And the sea's risen now, besides.

Nervous murmuring through the crowd.

Goddamn.

Saul's voice behind me. He pushes past the first layer of people and peers at the squall.

Everyone in the bunker, he commands. Where's Reg? Someone get Reg. Get everyone.

A mess of legs and shouts and scrambling back and forth between tents and bunker, Eve and I rushing back to the medical tent where Bud's trembling beneath Benjamin legs. The pilot's sitting upright on the cot, rubbing his eyes.

What's happening? he asks.

We gotta go, I say, breaking into a cold sweat. There's another superstorm, or whatever the hell, heading our way.

Benjamin groans and stands up wobbly. Looks like he's about to faint. I hitch his arm over my shoulder and call to Eve to help with Bud and she's already trying to lift him but he's too heavy.

I'll find someone else, she says brisk. She turns and runs out and I hear her calling to Seren. I also hear the gale picking up, the air stirring thicker.

Eve rushes back in.

Seren's helping Joan and others across. She's saying to hurry.

No shit, I tell her. You wait here with Bud. I'll get Benjamin across first.

Guiding him out of the flap, we tread towards the bustle of people scurrying round and crowding the bunker's entrance. The space is tight and filled with boxes. I keep asking for someone to take his weight, but no one's listening. People are stacking boxes, making space, crushing themselves in. Panicked, I lean him against the bunker wall, saying I'll return soon.

I got it from here, Benjamin says, though he's muddling the words and saying it to the wall.

Running back, the rusty flames of dusk snuffed out, the wind rushing against my chest, I find Eve holding Bud by the scruff of his neck, both wide-eyed and ready to bolt.

Go, I shout, then grab Bud and make a sprint for it.

The wind's picking up big time, a whirling dervish, flicking cold and damp and threatening. When I get to the bunker, crouching next to Eve, the door's shut. Its iron mouth is clamped and when I try opening it, locked. Eve and I stare at each other. I bury Bud in my arms. Benjamin's got his head and hands against the wall, bracing himself. He shifts his weight and clocks me and if anything, the gale is snapping him out of his stupor. He thumps his hand against the bunker, clutches his bandaged head with the other hand.

I'm looking for exits, entries, a miracle. Eve's banging the door, but it's a mute needle in a thunder-roll haystack. I motion to the back of the shelter, a slight ledge providing an ounce of coverage. Eve tugs at my shirt and points to the nearest path up the mountain.

You kidding me?

We'll climb above it!

I motion to Benjamin, Bud.

No. We won't.

Facing the squall, I spot a gap along the thick curve of rock, the same gap that exposed those winking waves. From this angle, I can see the boulders we passed on our way to the campsite.

I grip Benjamin's shoulder.

Can you walk?

His lips pinch and he bobs his head, stubborn.

Then follow me.

Holding Bud close, I yell at Eve to follow also. She's gawking at me, disbelieving.

No time to explain, only to act. Sand swirling, stones sling-shooting, I push into the oncoming tempest and duck behind the medical tent, the fabric roof ballooning, pegs pulling. Benjamin and Eve catch up and we shuffle our way past the rock towards the gap. The current of wind tides us through and we brace ourselves on the path. It's dark and treacherous. The gale wallops our faces as we edge across. I point to the boulders.

Benjamin's shouting something. I glance back. Eve's body is semi-concealed behind a baby boulder. Benjamin's balancing precarious on a thin strip of ground on the other side of her.

Pass, I yell at him, though it's obvious he can't with Eve's body blocking.

Thinking quick, I turn round and spot the fat boulder that's hiding the gun and knife, perched five feet yonder. I skirt along and twist into the constricted space, then stuff Bud in and he leans against the rock face like a magnet to iron. Twisting back out, I watch as Eve leans out a little, shouting something to Benjamin. He grips her stretched arm and edges past but then falters, pulling Eve out of the socket and she's swaying and slipping and a scream the size of space as she almost falls off the cliff.

Holy Jesus Fuck. I'm yelling and flying past Benjamin, then bracing against the rock just feet from her as she clings to a crevice in the boulder, the wind pinning her to it.

Eve!

She turns her head and I reach out, motioning to come. Lips pinching and hair unknotted and flapping wild, she starts inching her way. A foot between us and I reach for her arm and she's reaching too, but then a whip of wind sucks her away and she flaps the other way, back slamming into a wall of rock.

Ticks of time pass. In those ticks, almost slipping over the goddamn edge myself, I'm inching and reaching and she's staring at me, eyes flashing fear and fight, calm and surrender, and it takes all my might to keep looking at those eyes and to keep holding on and I've got her but I don't know if she's got me.

Come on.

The wind's still pinning and I've got her and I'm not letting go.

Tick tick tick.

Come on!

And whether she's fighting or surrendering, another ball of wind whips up and I take the inch and lunge myself towards, grabbing and tackling her to the ground, arms jelly, muscles spent, rocking in the gale's cradle til it decides to slam our bodies again against the mountain, twists of wind squeezing, and we can't breathe for the wind breathing us and I'm digging my nails into rock and hope and Eve's digging her nails into me and together we're clinging until time turns itself over.

Chapter 22

I feel the rawness of the air and the tenderness of the light and the birds twittering like they've always twittered and maybe always will. But it can't be dawn because the sky's still turning dark and the sun's still embedding in a baby blue sea.

I'm rubbing my stinging chest, skin warm and freezing. Eve's clutching my hand and her eyes are opening and closing, registering. We're sitting upright and Benjamin's holding Bud secure and peering at the sea. A rocket of laughter fires from his mouth.

You know how I came upon this mountain? he says, wiping tears from his chin. Saul and Reg were stranded on top of another peak further north of here, both shaking like leaves and looking like them, too. Reg had just passed his army pilot certificate and they were doing spot searches for other survivors when Reg lost control of his copter. Strong winds. Hail stones. One of the blades snapped, plus a wheel burst upon landing and it was by God's grace they survived at all. I was doing fire outbreak checks when I spotted them. Picked them up real quick and bee lined it to Snowy. And you'd think *that* was a storm.

He grabs some sand and lets it sift through his fingers.

You know Saul's just a pawn in this game? A low ranking Navy guy who's been given some higher ranking authority until we get rescued. If we get rescued.

A pause hangs in the air. Eve's slumping and rubbing her thigh. It's too dark to see much bruising but I wouldn't be surprised if we were both covered head to toe.

We need to check on the others, I tell her.

They should be the ones checking on *us*.

Eve's face clouds over. I squeeze her hand.

They were panicking. No one thinks straight when they panic.

She looks at me. Smiles.

Well, you're pretty good at it.

First time for everything, I smile back.

A strange sound from Bud. I glance over and he's gnawing at his bandage, wanting off.

Come here, buddy. Let me help.

Benjamin releases him and he pads over, tail wagging high, oblivious to the cliff edge only feet away, though the difference in weather is something else. The air's as motionless as a praying mantis and raw pink, tender from the tempest's lashing. The calm after the storm.

Still.

We need to get off this mountain, I say.

Benjamin stretches his legs.

Got that right. Now that the storm's past, the signal should be up and running again, telling us what's what.

I finish tugging Bud's bandage off then peer at the sea floating calm and flat and turning black.

Those boats docked in the harbor, I ask him. They in working order?

Enough to bridge us over to a ship.

A few are boat pods, right?

Sure they are.

I pause.

So, why hasn't anyone taken off in them?

Power supply's too unpredictable, he says. Though there's another reason.

His fingers worry the gauze around his head.

Tell me. What have you two noticed since you've arrived on this mountain? The obvious, I mean.

I look at him, dumb.

That women outnumber the men?

No. The more obvious.

Folk are scared?

Terrified. They're afraid of the unknown, and no one likes the unknown even more than the unknown they know already. You put a boat pod in front of anyone in that frame of mind and they turn the other way - especially in this muddled weather. A ship's a much safer bet, even if it decides where you're going next.

I scratch my chin.

So, you're going to board?

Damn right I'm going to board. Can't wait to get back to bacon and eggs and business as usual.

Jack? Is that you? Eve?

A wisp of a voice floating around the corner, close to the gap. We turn our heads to a small figure walking gingerly towards. I ease myself up, legs cramping, back stiff and paining.

Joan. Go easy now. The path narrows just there.

She halts.

Thank God you're alright, she says, wiping her forehead clear of sweat.

She peers through the darkness.

Seren thought you two stayed put in the medical tent, but when you weren't there...is that there fellow the other pilot?

She squints past us towards Benjamin. He gives her a salute.

All accounted for, he says.

You need to come back now, she says soft. All of you. It's safer by the campsite.

Benjamin snorts.

I wouldn't go that far.

He gets up slow and slumps past us towards Joan. The moon's rising over the mountain top, providing just enough light to navigate. I help Eve up and tell the group to wait a minute. Stepping to the boulder, I twist round and slide my fingers over the slit, feeling for the gun and knife. I release and pocket them tight, then join the others. The five of us move along the cliff edge slow and steady, my legs pins and needling. Bud's limping a touch but otherwise alright. Eve, on the other hand, is struggling. I'm right behind her and she's taking an age, rubbing her thigh every third step, saying it's not serious when I ask.

When we emerge campsite side, I notice the fire has burnt itself out. A lantern is hanging from a tree branch spotlighting the bunker with its door ajar - a herd of people huddled inside. In the shadowy darkness, tents are grotesque creatures - torn and flung all over the place. By some act of grace, the medical tent is still erect. A last soldier standing at attention. We watch on as Seren emerges from the flap, the fabric torn to shreds, holding a torch and blankets. She spots us after a couple of steps and rushes over.

Where were you? she asks.

On the other side of the bunker, Benjamin says tight.

I thought you had made it in, she says, forehead in a knot. It was pitch black in there and noisy, too. Couldn't hear or see anyone.

Everyone doing alright? I ask her.

Luckily, yes. And the signal's stronger. We should be hearing news about other storms, or rescue, soon. We'll clear this mess up in the morning.

She lowers her voice.

We need to decide what to do with the body, too.

What body?

Benjamin looks at each of us in turn.

No one's told you? Seren says.

No.

That boy. Bobby. Just before the storm hit. Wolves got to him.

How'd do know it was wolves?

Seren shrugs.

Does it matter?

The pilot's eyes grow wide.

Knew it would happen. This mountain's getting smaller by the minute.

Seren's chin drops.

I know. Cila wants to bury him. The smell will attract anything prowling, course. She just needs some time to come to her senses.

Benjamin sighs.

Time is what we don't have.

He starts walking towards the medical tent, rubbing his bandage.

Eve wraps her arms around her waist.

Been a bitch of a day.

Seren nods and motions to the medical tent.

The cot beds are free, she says. People are either setting up camp in the bunker or in their sleeping bags. You'll have to clean up first, though.

We tread over, finding the cabinets and cupboards at all angles, cups and kits and stethoscopes on the floor, broken bottles scattered with liquid pouring, one of the beds tipped. Eve tidies the equipment while I mop up the liquid with makeshift cloths before Bud gets the chance. When the space is cleared, I offer Eve one of the cots, Benjamin the other, then gather some blankets and bundle them on the ground. Bud snuggles in.

Five minutes later, Benjamin is snoring sound. Eve's lying on the cot beside him but she's wide awake and rubbing her temples.

Can't sleep, either? I ask her.

She raises to her elbows.

I think most of me's still falling off that cliff.

Tell me about it.

I dig into my pocket and get up and hand her the knife. She mouths a thanks and slips it underneath her pillow.

I look at her.

How did you happen to have a knife on you?

Silence floats between us.

My Ma gave it to me.

Really?

When I was a baby. Look, it may have been someone else, but I'd like to think it was her. Was wrapped at the bottom of the basket I was lying in when Pa found me in the hollow of that apple tree. That's how I got my name.

She pulls the blade out from the pillow and rotates the handle in front of me.

See?

Hard to in the darkness, but I can just about make out an engraving etched deep in the hilt, towards the bottom. Calligraphic script. Three curly letters.

Pa let me have it when I turned twelve.

Her mouth hardens, then softens.

I'll always thank him for that, though I think his sister urged him on. Bethany helped raise me until Pa could fend for himself. I suppose she knew how much it would mean to have something of my Ma. Still, I've often wondered how I ended up with folks so opposite. So shut behind closed doors. Church, and otherwise.

It's helped you become more of who you are, I tell her straight.

She stares at me.

I never knew why my Ma left me in that tree. I've reasoned that however she came to hold me inside of her womb, she couldn't hold me outside of it, in a world separate from her inner one. Anyway, all I know is that there's this carved out bit in me just like there is in that tree. Right here.

She points to her chest. I look her in the eye.

Maybe there's always carved out spaces in people. Between them. And maybe that's OK.

She opens her mouth to say something but closes it and lies back down on the cot, facing away.

What do you want, Eve? I ask her. What do you have to hang your life on? You must have something.

I don't know, she says finally. Starting over's about as far as I've gone.

Chapter 23

I'm lying on the blankets beside Bud and gazing at the moon filtering through the ribbons of cloth holding up the entrance. Eve's been sleeping for a while now. I move as gradual as I can so as to not wake Bud and settle closer to the cloth, watching the golden orb rise above the mountain peak, lifting in a desert sky filled with oases of stars, satellites stuck between. I close my eyelids and listen to the water lapping yonder. I'm hungry for it - for its tugging and tiding and calling me forth.

Exhaling into the night, I stand up stiff and peer towards the bunker. Most folk are sleeping, a few are tossing and turning, fewer still chatting in hushed tones in sleeping bags set close to the campfire. I move slow and walk towards the boulders. If I didn't know any better, the bulging stones are bears, waiting to lunge. But the moon and stars are guiding and gaining height, showing things for what they are.

I walk through the gap and another five steps and a liquid earth, a dark syrup swaying. Maple amber with a silver runway.

I'm looking at the sea and it's looking at me and it's calling - a soft dark bright night - a sea breathing and gentle rippling.

Unfurling.

And the feeling gets stronger. Stranger. The ache to leap off this ledge and dive in and float away. Unnerving, but familiar. Unnerving because it's familiar. I lean back against the rock face, back from the pull of the water and I realize something. The sea's always been in me, stirring all this time.

And maybe in Pa all his time.

I stand up and turn around and tread past the bears and return to Eve and Bud and Benjamin.

All three are still sleeping.

So I stay waking.

I stay waking.

Chapter 24

Time ticks on. No way to tell it, but at least a quarter of an hour has passed since I woke up from a mangle of dreams, scared and disorientated and finding Bud gone. I've circled the campsite twice. I'm exhausted but pumped with panic. Everyone's sleeping so I can't shout out his name, though I want to scream it from the mountain top. I rush back to the medical tent, shoulders dropping at the sight of the small impression left in the blankets. Grabbing a torch off the cabinet top, I make my way past the bunker towards the lantern hanging on the pine tree, then past it towards the other pines where his paw prints are stamping the soil. I turn left onto the nearest path leading up the peak.

My dog's sheepish but not stupid. He wouldn't go searching through dense bush or anywhere off piste. His nose would have picked up human scent and gone with it.

Fifty steps up the track and I halt. There's howling in the far distance. I keep stepping, my breathing tight, the air cramped.

Bud? Hey, Bud, it's me.

Noiseless now, except the breeze ruffling the pine needles. After that onslaught of wind and sea spray along with it, the smell emanating is strong and pungent.

I click the torch and wave it across the trees and bushes skirting. Bugs dart and wheel in the shock of light and a small creature scatters into a hole just shy of the path. I continue up the meandering incline, grateful for its gradual slope, calling to Bud, louder, desperate.

A whooshing sound feet away. I flick the torch and another creature scatters. Skinny mole, or fat rat. I continue climbing, ears pricked for larger things moving, fiercer things howling. I turn a bend and the sea comes into clearer view. Stars are spreading over a curve

of pre-dawn sky - black tinted with violet. Never climbed high enough to see that curve before. A single star, big and bright, is bobbing on the horizon, about to submerge. I walk on.

Maybe I've gone up the wrong path. Maybe Bud's somehow tucked himself in that same boulder, having found a different gap leading, our paths somehow crossing. I climb for another quarter hour until the track leads to a cave of sorts - a large chunk bitten out of the rock. I trudge over and slump onto the ledge, arms clasping my legs, head tucked between, taking stock.

I don't even know what day it is.

My arms clasp tighter.

Soft whimpering behind me. I jerk round. Bud is hunkered down at the back of the rock. A shadow of a shadow, a crumpled outline.

Grabbing my torch, I flick the switch and angle the beam at his paws so as not to stun. The light grazes the stone. Bud's wagging soft though he's staring right past me, eyes locked. I spin around, expecting a wolf or the whole pack. Instead, it's Reg, standing not five feet from me, rigid. I raise the torch to his face. The bridge of his nose has been stitched with a two-inch suture. He squints.

Lower that thing, will ya?

I drop the beam to his chest.

It's time for you to go, farm boy. I don't want you in my camp anymore.

I angle the torch to his waist. He's gripping a wrench. I take a breath.

Can't do what you're asking. I need to go back to the camp. For whenever rescue comes.

He spits a wad of tobacco on the ground, points to the bobbing star just visible through the trees.

Have you looked at the sea lately? That spark on the water is a ship coming. But you're not going to be on that ship, because I don't want you on it. I don't care where you go, just go.

He steps closer. Bud stays back. I stay put.

I need to get on that ship, I tell him. So does Eve.

Eve's not your problem anymore. She's my problem.

He raises the wrench. Motions to the path.

Let me make myself real clear here, cowboy. If you go back to the camp, I'm going to kill you. The choice is yours. The track's right there. Take your dog. Take yourself. It's time for you to go.

I stare him in the eye.

Can't do that.

He cocks his head, rolls the tobacco round his tongue. Drops the wrench on the ground and reaches for something in his back pocket.

Hey pooch, look what I've got more of.

Reg unravels a slab of meat from a plastic wrapper. It's dripping with juice. Bud pads forwards, tongue draping.

Bud. Stop.

He doesn't.

Bud. Come.

He scuttles over the cave ledge and grabs the slab while Reg scoops him up in his arms.

Attaboy.

My insides turn.

You've got plenty of women to choose from, I tell him.

I want her.

I bite my tongue.

She can make up her own mind.

Reg chuckles foul.

Well, the way I view it is like this. You got two options. You take your loyal doggy friend here and hit the road right now, or you hit the road alone.

He crooks his arm around Bud's neck. What's left of the meat drops out of Bud's mouth and falls to the soil.

I take a step towards.

What, you gonna use your fist again?

Put Bud down.

What's it gonna be, cowboy?

I reach for my back pocket. Pull out the gun. Reg freezes.

Bet that thing doesn't even have bullets.

Put Bud down.

Sure thing.

In one shift motion, Reg lowers to one knee and slams Bud onto his side. Bud squirms but gets nowhere. His tongue's starting to bulge.

I may not have believed in it before - the Devil - but now I do. He starts twisting. He starts twisting Bud's neck while I stop shouting. Time stops then, in no time at all. In Reg's eyes, I'm seeing every disaster there ever was, and in Bud's, whatever love's left over, and an earthquake comes rumbling so quick, I'm shaking crazy mad, but my hand's holding the gun and my arm's holding my hand and my heart's holding saner than it ever has, so I click, aim, fire, and all goes hush.

All except the pounding in my ears. I hold my eyelids tight. Can't look. Have to. When I do, times starts rushing ahead and the pounding's on the outside - Bud's thumping towards me with a shock of plum splattered over his coat. I gaze down at my gun and realize I've just shot a man.

I squint at Reg's lame body bent double on the ground three yards yonder, blood pouring from his head. Seeing no one and hearing no thing save a few birds whispering, I scoop Bud's wagging body into my arms and bolt down the mountain.

Chapter 25

There's blood on Bud, and now on me, the smell no doubt seeping. I'm trying to sprint without tumbling, hold my dog without dropping. Twigs are cracking underfoot. Shapes are looming close, far, then close again. Every time I glance back, I'm sure Reg is following - shadows and sounds are doing scary things in the dappled starlight and the breeze between the leaves. Sharp edges and imaginings. Ghosts of what's past and maybe what's to come.

When I reach base camp, I'm clear out of breath though wired with adrenalin. I've been so busy bolting, I force myself to halt and duck out of sight just in time behind one of the pine trees as a woman scurries past, looking for something.

Over here, someone shouts.

The woman turns on her heels and leaves me clamping Bud's mouth shut.

Quit whining, I whisper.

Still clamping til realize I'm squeezing his ribs like a vice. I loosen my hold and survey the surrounds. Another fire's going, plumes of smoke rising. The smell is acrid, noxious. A few folk are feeding it all kinds of things - broken poles, bits of fabric, strings of wood. Dawn's arrived and brushing thin streaks of light across the campsite, and people are making the most of it - packing and clearing up. I hear scratches of conversation. Snippets about signals and ships and timing and weather. The atmosphere is more edgy than elevated. I sweep my eyes to the sea and can't see for the trees, but I imagine the vessel's

getting closer inch by inch, a minuscule city on a rectangle island sliding through a slippery sea.

I take a step forwards. The medical tent is just shy of my vision. Another step and the flap is visible - its ribbons tied back by a thicker ribbon with Eve standing in front. Can't see her expression, but her arms are crossed firm. After standing like that for minutes, she tucks herself back into the tent. She's the only shadow moving inside. Now's my chance.

I tiptoe past the pine tree - the one with the lantern hanging on it - giving it a wide berth, then head around the back of the bunker, straightening up when I get to the bushes. My arms graze thorns as I pass. Some folk are hovering around the campsite, close to the spot where the storm was first sighted. Others are poking around the depths of the bunker. I make a quick calculation of where the opened hatch is and where I'll be flying past. Anyone looking towards the entrance will see me clear as day. I've got no other options, so I fly past anyway.

Oh. My. God.

Eve's jaw drops open.

Shhhh.

I place a finger to my lips and motion to the water bucket positioned on the other side of the tent. She nods, eyes flitting to Bud's coat. I plop him in the corner while she rushes outside. I tell Bud to sit still, then grab some cloths and a grungy towel hanging from a hook. I rip my rain jacket and shirt off.

Eve comes back with the bucket, arms stretched long. I hurry over and take the handles.

What happened? she asks.

You know a ship's coming, right?

Yeah. But -

Well, I'm not going to be on it. You can either get on it, or you can come with me. Your call.

She stares at me wide eyed. I place my hands on her shoulders.

You've got one minute to decide.

I turn, frantic, scrub my jacket, shirt, then slap some water over Bud's coat. Someone's outside. Getting closer. Getting inside.

I jerk round.

Give me the gun.

Benjamin is standing next to Eve, taking in Bud's pink fur and my red speckled chest.

He holds out his palm.

Give me the gun, he repeats.

Christ, Benjamin. I don't have time for this.

Damn right you don't.

He steps forward.

You trust me? he asks.

To do what?

He steps closer. I reach for my gun. We lock eyes and I hand it over, wary. He opens the magazine and checks for bullets and hands it back.

One bullet left. So, what happened?

I exhale.

Reg happened. OK? I shot him.

Dead?

I look at Eve.

You coming?

Eve closes her eyelids. Opens them. Sucks in her breath.

I thought you were more the saving than the killing kind. Jack.

I look at Bud, then back at her, squinting harsh.

Your call.

Benjamin steps backwards, coughing into his palm.

Those boat pods have been plundered. They all have. And you'll have to pass the funeral march. Most folk are already there, along with Bobby's body. There's a drop from the edge of the helicopter landing pad straight down to the ocean. Saul's just waiting on Reg to return from his trek up the mountain. Told Saul he was going to a higher elevation to check on the ship's whereabouts.

The ship's coming straight for us. I saw it.

Wouldn't count on it. Signal's down again. Last we heard, it was diverting course.

I hide the gun under the pillow and towel Bud down.

Not my problem.

Benjamin chuckles.

You know I liked you from the start?

A voice blaring through my bones. Male. Rough. Saul.

He's calling for Benjamin. The pilot looks at me and is about to say something but then a wave of footfall spills towards the tent. Benjamin lurches and presses Eve up against me as Saul barges in. The old man stops short, ogling. I glance over Eve's shoulder like I'm seeing both men for the first time.

Found em, Benjamin says, sly.

Eve keeps her hands on my chest, covering the stains. Benjamin steps in front of Bud. Saul grunts something and steps back and stares me down.

You seen Reg?

No.

You sure about that?

Yes.

He turns to Benjamin.

I'm going to circle the campsite again, then trek up that mountain. The smoke should keep the wolves at bay around here, but I'm getting worried for Reg. He should have been back by now. Over to you to lead the procession. The mother's all wound up and any more time spent dawdling and she's gonna break. The girl also.

I've got it from here, Benjamin says solemn. Any more news about the ship?

Saul licks his bottom lip.

Just get that boy off the mountain.

Chapter 26

Inch by inch, the ship is sailing away from the mountain. The crowd is looking on, gaping. Some are standing right at the cliff's edge, leaning slightly over as though they could reach out and tug it back. A few turn to Benjamin, eyebrows raised.

That must be where it's heading now, he tells the onlookers. Collecting survivors stranded on that capsized cruise liner due north. That latest storm hit them hard.

It'll be back, Seren says confident.

A woman standing closest to the edge side-glances the nurse.

Yeah, she says. But when?

The helicopter landing pad is on the north-west side, that much closer to the vessel gliding past. Close enough to see it's a container ship, towers stacked next to each other. Brown and rust and wine. Small and tall and fat. Eve and I are standing behind the others. The harbor is out of sight but I know it'll be lit by the peeking sun. A pearly glow is angling over that side of the mountain, striking the ship's hull just so, creating a smudge of gray for a length of sea until the metal frame shines silver and the containers, contained and containing, stay dull.

Joan places her hand on Bobby's body and clears her throat.

If I had a boat to take you from here to there - from one shore to the other - I'd be tempted. But each person's journey is their own.

Sighing low, Joan removes her hand and nods to Benjamin. He's standing at one end, forearms under the boy's shoulders, another man at the boy's feet. Together they lift the cocooned sail canvas with ropes binding towards the edge where the mother and girl are hovering, one leaning in to the other, sobbing. The girl stops crying and goes quiet, watching.

With the effort of lifting a feather, the men swing the boy once back and then over the cliff. The mother gasps. The girl clasps. The crowd disperses.

I whisper in Eve's ear, antsy.

I gotta go. Now.

She glances towards the sea.

You sure? Seeing that ship...isn't it crazy, what you're about to do?

My lungs tighten.

I gotta go.

Folk start returning to the campsite. My body's tensing with every passing footstep, expecting Saul's to come charging any moment. Seren's trailing behind everyone with Benjamin at a short distance behind her. She turns abrupt and glances past his shoulder at Eve and I and Bud.

You coming? she says.

Eve throws me a look.

Yeah.

Seren nods and turns and walks on. Eve follows slowly. Benjamin lags, then follows, too. When their steps grow faint, me and Bud start walking, then jogging, fast.

Take care of yourself, Jack.

I spin around. It's Benjamin, stepping closer.

You too.

Know where you're going?

I glance at the horizon.

I figure there's only one sea and it only goes in one direction.

And which direction would that be?

Whichever one you want it to go in.

He laughs soft.

Well, maybe I'll see you on the other side of that.

He tilts his head to the path behind.

Don't worry about Eve. Saul won't get past me, you hear?

I give him what passes for a smile, then a thumbs up. He grins, lifts his thumb, then motions me and Bud on. We descend swiftly, the crisp mountain air shifting sour-sweet sea, bronze soil turning sand. Layers of gold and sapphire are unrolling along the horizon. I'm feeling dizzy, but it's only due to the presence of those layers plus the absence of food and the thrill of touching the sea. I've heard how the salt makes you float and cuts right through and tastes like seaweed, too. Three-quarters way down the path and what's left of the harbor comes into view - the old man's gum line with the tiny-teeth boats attached and chattering in the welcoming waves. The ship is slinking further round the corner of the mountain, a coppery flame being sucked into the darker waters beyond.

I sight the ramp in the distance, rickety and swaying. Most of the sailboats have been swept clear of sails, ropes, life jackets. The boat pods are docked furthest away, more compact and dome-shaped than the rest and just as ransacked, dirty footprints running all over. Bud pads ahead, sniffing and wagging, stopping just short of the ramp when he sees it moving. I pick him up and guide us across, then down another ramp to a smaller dock, waterlogged and already smoothing out from the saltwater kissing it all the while. I look back at the mountain. No one's charging, and no one's following, either.

Sighing, I walk tentative across the soggy dock towards the first boat pod, a twenty footer, still intact. I'd be more amazed seeing this beauty in the flesh if my heart wasn't in my throat, trying to escape. Apple wood interior. Fiberglass exterior. Solar panels and unbreakable mast. Born to last.

I lower Bud and help him onto the deck and it creaks and tilts as the boom strap slides back and forth, slapping. The helm is silver and solid. I touch the wheel and my dog looks on, curious.

For when you want to use your own hands, I tell him.

Holding my breath, I open the hatch and step into the cabin and flick the power cell. It comes alive, blinking bright red. I breathe relief and scour the control board. There's an emergency button with limited options for limited signal strength. I make it simple and choose Auto-Sail. East Coast. Safest route. Then I check the stores quick as I can. No food, no water, but from what I gather, a silicon-type box with a guidebook on top on how to turn

saltwater into drinkable water, plus a rain jacket and small-scale fishing rod hidden under one of the seats.

Wait here, I tell Bud.

I climb out and jump onto the other boat pod. Seeing even less on offer, I rush back empty-handed, press the activation button on the control board, then sit on the stern, my dog held snug between my knees. He keeps sniffing the air, looking this way and that, but he's otherwise placid. I stay mute, clutching the rigging joints, listening to the boat release its anchor and start its engine, the wind whistling across the cinches. Then the sail slinks up the mast like it's got all the time in the world. After what seems an age, my muscles tight as clams, the boat pulls away.

Then it doesn't. I scour the hull, the engine revving restless. Damn it - there's a rope near the stern still tying boat to dock. I launch myself at the knot but my fingers find no purchase. Scrambling down to the cabin, the engine sputtering, almost stopping, I'm about to click the switch right off when something silver flashes. I leap up the steps. Eve's sawing her knife through the fraying cord, flaxen hair flaying all about, Bud jumping up and licking her knees.

Ten seconds later and the rope snaps clean. I pull her towards as the boat lurches forward, the blade barely missing my chest. I inhale and she exhales and together we sail out of the half sunk harbor, the waves rocking us in their good-bye tide like rock-a-bye baby, like the song Ma used to sing when I was small and sleeping. I start easing up a touch.

You OK?

Eve's standing by the cabin door, gripping the doorframe. Her hair is back up in a knot.

Traveling on water is different than I thought it would be, she says.

How so?

She shrugs, smiles, then looks over her shoulder.

We didn't say good-bye to Joan. Think she'll be alright?

I wipe my fringe from my forehead. Beads of sweat, also.

Sure.

Think we will?

I look at her.

She's got God and I've got a gun. And no one fucks with either.

She laughs. A freeing laugh, soaring right across the ocean. She smiles at me, then steps into the cabin to check the control board. The air is crisp but warm, the sun is rising, and my mind is wandering to Tommy, Frank, Ma and Pa. Bill and Betty and school friends and school bullies. Haven't thought of them much over the last few days. I wonder who's made it. I wonder who's relieved to have not.

I step towards Bud. He's peering over the bow, peering at all the life circling in the deep. I sit beside him, taking my rain jacket off to dry, and dip my toes in the clear water, inhaling its ebbing and flowing as natural as breath. Then I ruffle his coat as he licks my toes and tell him we're leaving and arriving. That it's time to go, and time to stop.

He cocks his head at me.

Buddy, some say you must find your tribe. Others say the tribe must find you. But after traveling all this way, I'd say there's no truer tribe than what lays within you.

I give my dog another ruffle and we sit together for a long time, Bud looking down and me looking forward.

When I'm ready, I reach for my gun resting beside me and rotate its metal coldness in my palms. Then I get on my knees and toss it overboard. The metal sinks fast in the rippling waves, then disappears out of sight.

Looking back at the mountain one last time and seeing no one and hearing no thing, I return to the stern and untether from all I used to believe in.

And then I take the helm.

THE END

